

Mother Nature's Sex Appeal: An Investigation Of Natural Beauty Products

Natural: the word is a slogan. It conjures many definitions, depending on the mood or the circumstance. Pure, healthy, innate, lush, green, wild... but—sexy? The more I shop the more I notice how many beauty products are pimped with a natural image. Packages seduce with offers of pure ingredients, plant-based formulas, and promises to rejuvenate, moisturize, restore and clarify. From soap to shaving cream, eyeliner to toothpaste, cosmetic and health-care products pledge to draw upon the alleged purity of nature to make me look and feel like my true self. One glance down any shampoo aisle and it becomes clear that nature and beauty are somehow connected.

What exactly is natural about these products? And how do they propose to make me beautiful? Determined to find some answers I set off in search of facts and inspiration—to supermarkets, health food stores and naturopathic pharmacies around the city.

According to Shelley, an esthetician at Finlandia Natural Pharmacy, there are sound reasons for seeking out natural beauty products. One motivation is to avoid man-made toxins. Personal care products must be relatively safe in order to make it onto the market—most companies do animal or human testing—however they are not subject to the same regulations as food or drugs because they are not meant to be ingested directly into the body. Products might contain substances that could cause problems if ingested but which are thought to pose a minimal risk when applied superficially.

But the idea that the skin is a perfect barrier to the world is misleading. It can absorb, at least to some degree, substances that it comes in contact with. Shelley gave an example. If you rub garlic onto the soles of your feet you can taste it in your mouth within an hour. Conventional pharmacies sell creams for joint problems, which manage to affect the tissue below although applied to the skin's surface. It made sense then, for me to be worried about what I was putting on my skin.

Are natural ingredients healthier than the man-made alternatives? Perhaps the body is more likely to know what to do with them, in contrast to synthetic ingredients, which we may not be able to metabolize or break down as easily. I thought of Olestra, a synthetic fat that came onto the market a few years ago. It was developed to allow people to ingest greasy foods without gaining weight. Unfortunately it proved difficult to digest, causing a number of unpleasant side effects including diarrhea. Sodium lauryl sulfate in my shampoo, propylene glycerol in my hand cream, aluminum zirconium tetrachlorohydrate in my deodorant—there were so many different chemicals, preservatives and foaming agents. I didn't know what the long-term effects of these were and hadn't really stopped to consider them until now.

Some products I saw contained only natural ingredients. For example Lavera, a German company, produces a line of cosmetics using only organic ingredients and without synthetics of any kind. Others clearly stated that they were avoiding certain ingredients thought to be harmful, yet which are commonly found in regular brands. Prairie Naturals manufactures shampoos and conditioners that do not contain sodium lauryl sulfate, a

common detergent in many other shampoos, and Jason cosmetics produces a natural deodorant stick without aluminum chlorohydrate.

I noticed a number of products boasted natural ingredients with “proven” healing properties—aloe vera, tea tree oil, oil of lavender and Vitamins E and C, for example. All of these are considered to provide benefits to human skin, and this certainly was reflected in their abundance on store shelves. Aloe vera in particular was available in a variety of products including creams, gels and soaps. In order to reap the full benefits of aloe, however, Shelley at Finlandia recommended purchasing ‘food grade’ aloe, rather than simply using an aloe-themed product. Food grade aloe is 100% pure and is of a higher quality than that used in aloe-themed products, which also may contain alcohol or glycerin. She said that ingesting pure aloe or using it as a mask can be more effective than using it diluted in another product.

I found it encouraging to think of drawing on the healing power of natural substances. But as my search continued to London Drugs I was discouraged to find that the majority of ‘natural’ products they sold, although they contained one or two natural ingredients, were basically the same as all the others on store shelves. Clairol Herbal Essences shampoo advertises a “99% pure/plant based” formula, apparently “made with organic herbs and botanicals that come to us in pure mountain spring water.” Yet when I compared, ingredient by ingredient, the contents of Herbal Essences shampoo with a very clearly non-natural brand in the same aisle they were almost identical! The only difference was Herbal Essences offered a natural floral scent—12th on the list of ingredients—and floral-themed packaging. I scanned the entire shampoo aisle, determined to find an exception but every single bottle, whether it claimed to be natural or not, contained the same basic ingredients. What on earth was going on?

Even more confusing were products that contained absolutely nothing natural at all, just a nature-themed image. Nature’s Collection, for example, was the title of a gift basket of bath products. Upon closer inspection the only natural ingredient was water. In fact the label even warned to “avoid contact with eyes”. Was this really an homage to nature? And what about Daily Basics natural wildberry and orchid conditioner “for daily care of permed or colour treated hair?” The ingredients were: purified water followed by a whole slough of items I couldn’t pronounce. But apparently it “protects hair from everyday environmental and styling abuse.” I presumed they meant from the sun, rain and blow-drier, but it was nice to think of hair being safe from ecological woe too.

Another motivation for purchasing natural products is to promote environmental and/or social responsibility. It can be difficult to make abrupt lifestyle changes but you can vote with your dollar by purchasing products from organizations whose principles you agree with. For example, the Body Shop advocates for fair trade with indigenous groups and against animal testing and violence against women. Were natural beauty products themselves good to the environment? I came across some products that had biodegradable formulas and recyclable packaging, for example Tom’s of Maine toothpaste whose mandate is “to be distinctive in products and policies which honor and sustain our natural world.” But compared to the sheer variety of natural-themed brands these seemed but a small fraction. Occasionally the non-toxic nature of a product was

pitched as an act of ecological goodwill, but in the majority of cases it fulfilled a self-serving agenda. The aim was to treat yourself naturally; the environment might be considered but only as a feel-good afterthought. Personal health was key.

Before I set out on my shopping trip I had been under the impression that the majority of natural beauty products offered pure, healthy ingredients with natural healing properties, manufactured by environmentally responsible companies. But my investigation revealed that only a few products stayed true to these aims. Some products really did offer hypoallergenic formulas containing minimally processed ingredients, including herbs that offer documented healing properties or were gentler on sensitive skin than human-made alternatives. However the majority were just regular brands disguised by a natural aesthetic. Some contained absolutely nothing natural at all. And yet I had been tempted to buy them anyway... why?

One reason has to do with labeling. Clairol can claim that Herbal Essences is a natural shampoo, even though it contains the same ingredients as others because, as Shelley from Finlandia advised, 'natural' is such a loose definition. It is very easy for a company to call something natural just because some ingredients may have originally been sourced in nature, regardless of how processed they are. For example, the main ingredient in Herbal Essences shampoo is sodium laureth sulfate. Although derived from coconut oil it certainly doesn't occur in nature and is even suspected to be damaging to skin over the long term. Or, even if a product doesn't contain any natural ingredients it is easy to brand it Nature's Collection and slap a sunflower on the package. If consumers are concerned about their health, they need to read labels and be informed about their choices. . Otherwise you must trust what you see on the package and the image of the sunflower will make the most lasting impression.

As if defining what is 'natural' wasn't difficult enough, decoding product labels can be just as confusing. For example, how do you know whether a product contains a natural ingredient or a synthetic version of the same substance, if the same chemical name is given in either case? Long lists of multi-syllabic words can appear like hieroglyphics to anyone without a degree in chemistry or pharmacology. Deciphering the ingredients list of the average shampoo would require knowledge most consumers don't have.

But would this knowledge change consumer behavior? Not necessarily, according to Jen, a representative of the Body Shop. Many of their products contain artificial colours and preservatives. I found this strange, considering that nearly everything in their stores has a floral or fruit-like fragrance and at least one token natural-themed ingredient. In defense, Jen said their customers want attractive, long-lasting products. The lights in the store are very bright and their products must be able to withstand several weeks on the shelves before purchase. Without preservatives some products might begin to decompose or go rancid on your bathroom counter before you get a chance to use them. She also maintains that nobody has ever complained about a product's colour being too vivid. In fact, she swears that if two bath gels are side by side on a shelf and the colour in one has faded a bit, customers will choose the brighter one nearly every time, almost as if picking the biggest, ripest berries from the bush.

Why do we get a ‘natural’ fix, even if the product isn’t pure or environmentally friendly? Is it the fruity or floral scents? The tranquil packaging? My mind wandered as my eyes came to rest upon a pile of natural sea sponges. I was tempted to purchase one but wasn’t sure how the sponge would have felt about that, and there was no way to ask it. Why was I attracted to this? What was it going to do for me? My initial motivations for purchasing this natural beauty product were for the physical benefits (they’re apparently great for exfoliating) but the result would have been an emotional fix, regardless of the purity or ecological impact of the product. What is it about natural imagery that is potentially more powerful and attractive than the reality of the product?

Nature is attractive and images of nature can be just as appealing, if not more so, than the real thing. By purchasing the sea sponge I would have felt like I was about to receive something from a pure and healthy source. In a sense my desire for a natural product was not just a quest for purity in a synthetic world, but a deeper yearning for the aesthetic pleasure of nature. Using natural images to sell products seems a bit like using sex to sell—well, just about anything. Both approaches use the momentum of already-present desire in society to attract attention to a product. Imitations of nature play upon a whole wealth of subconscious imagery and associations we have of nature and natural things. The word itself conjures up feelings of goodness, wholesomeness, power and vitality. All it takes is a few simple visual clues and key phrases to generate an association between these nebulous feelings and a product. Nature becomes a brand.

Nature is pleasing enough, but what the products offer to provide—via natural images—is also very desirable. The promise of beauty is eternally seductive, and natural beauty is timelessly irresistible. By associating nature and all its qualities with these products we hope to transfer these qualities to ourselves, restoring us to a pristine state: our natural selves. The unspoken assumption is that there is something mysterious in the natural world, a life-force that we can participate in by harnessing it. Nature can heal and purify, cleansing us from our human-made troubles, simply by applying it in creams and lotions to our bodies. In some cases this holds true—certain ingredients can heal—but many products seem to capitalize on this idea without actually delivering the goods.

Many products claim to ‘restore natural shine and luster’ to human hair, but do consumers really believe this? Even if we don’t fully trust the power of the product to perform, it feels good to try it anyway. Health feels good; it’s nice to know you’re taking care of yourself. Natural beauty products are about self-nurturing and knowing you are trying to look your best. It’s about cultivating the appearance of inner health as much as it is about health itself.

Why focus on a healthy appearance? According to David Buss, an evolutionary psychologist, how we look is part of our identity. Our skin’s radiance is on display for all to see, as an obvious visual marker of our age and physical condition. In his book *The Evolution of Desire* he attests to the notion that, although many aspects of beauty are cultural shaped, youth, health and virility are universal indicators of beauty for either sex. Our pursuit of beauty has a biological basis. It is entirely natural, at any age, for us to want to be as healthy and beautiful as we can. The cosmetic industry is not a creator of

our lust for beauty, but a response to it. The function of nearly all cosmetics is to simulate the appearance of youth and health; blush adds a healthy glow, eyeliner defines the eyes making them look bigger and brighter, foundation and cover-up even out the skin tone. The idea of natural cosmetics and care products is to effect this goal naturally, to look as nature intended you to look.

Ironically, the majority of personal care products are not even necessary for a natural look. Addressing physical health, including proper nutrition and emotional well-being are far more crucial. When people come to her with skin problems, the first thing that Shelley at Finlandia asks them about is the functioning of their liver and kidneys. She says that because these are the detox organs of your body, any problems with them tend to show up on your skin. She advises people to avoid alcohol, caffeine and excess sugar and to find ways to manage stress. The purchase of skin care products is akin to treating the symptoms rather than the causes. I've heard it said that a good nights sleep and few glasses of water will do more for your face than any cleanser ever could and that smiling can do much more to influence people's impressions of you than cosmetics. Using makeup is a short-cut to the illusion of wellness. We end up consuming the images of what we are working towards rather than actual lifestyle changes towards these things.

Why are we willing to settle for replications when we crave the real thing? Natural is sexy, but imitations can be even sexier. Representations of nature are often greener, brighter and purer than that which could possibly be found in nature itself; they attract because they are a hyper-natural realization of the world. We are consuming a 'natural' that doesn't exist, an idealization of a reality that is far more complex. When consuming natural beauty products we are also aspiring to a version of ourselves that doesn't quite exist... yet. Natural beauty is perpetually out of reach. Advertising lures us to beauty products by eliciting envy of our future self. We are fuelled by the envy of who and what we could become, offered not only what we could be if we were healthy but also a more exaggerated self beyond even that. Beauty products offer a means to be more striking than you ever could be naturally. Illusion can be more vivid, more glamorous and more titillating to the senses than the real thing. Why settle for your natural self when the simulation tastes so good?

The real secret to natural beauty is just to be healthy and confident. But until we can come to terms with ourselves, the promise of what we could be will be more exciting than who we really are.

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