

Author Biography

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Emma is a third-year history major with a minor in Ethnicity, Public Policy, Science, and Technology, and a (soon to be) minor in Political Science. Her areas of interest include the Enlightenment, history of science, women's history, and beauty. After graduation, Emma hopes to continue her education and pursue the legal field. In her free time, she enjoys baking, reading, and water coloring.

The Victims of Beauty: How Women Paid the Price of the Industrial Revolution, Science, and Hollywood

Emma Fay

The average white American woman in the 1920s started her morning by readying herself for the day. She pried open the medicine cabinet to grab the necessities and began her routine: prepping the skin by lightly patting on vanishing cream, adding a dusting of powder to even the complexion, and applying a liquid rouge with a dampened cotton ball for a flushed appearance.¹ Beauty resulted from these meticulous steps, though it was followed by the threats of blindness, lower limb paralysis, gum decay, tooth loss, and rash. Toxic heavy metals and irritants loomed in lavishly packaged jars, awaiting their next victim. The very products women used for beauty were the same ones listed on physicians' reports after their hospital stays. Why were harmful ingredients like radium, thallium, lead, and talc included in products that were applied directly onto people's skin in the pursuit of beauty? Moreover, why were women so eager to run to the shelves and salons to partake in new beauty trends when makeup application was viewed as distasteful just decades before? The answer is twofold. The Industrial Revolution led Americans to obsess over modernity and blindly trust in science. At the same time, Hollywood and the film industry's surge in popularity in the early 20th century changed the standards for beauty which created a new demand for cosmetics. By the 1920s and 1930s, these obsessions rapidly fueled the expansion of the unregulated cosmetic industry which poisoned unsuspecting women for decades before the federal government finally intervened through regulation in the late 1930s.

¹ Dorothy Cocks, *The Etiquette of Beauty* (New York: George H. Doran Company, 1927), <https://hdl.handle.net/2027/coo.31924003464041>, 192.

My research draws from cosmetic advertisements and toiletry listings in American newspaper articles from the early 20th century to evaluate the ideal consumer and the aspirations behind their consumption. Opinion pieces and anonymous advice articles from newspapers and magazines help to illustrate the American perception of makeup usage in the 1920s. Scientific journals reveal the academic community's outlook on chemical ingredients in the early 20th century and the crazed atmosphere surrounding modernity and science. Medical journals and complaint letters highlight the real and dangerous risks and the fallout from cosmetic usage, though many health effects remained unreported. This essay explores the causal relationship that exists between the cosmetic industry and the development of industry regulations, which allows for a niche window with which to study the history of science and women's history.

Cosmetic advertisements did not always litter the pages of the local newspaper. The Victorian era of cosmetics included homemade, word-of-mouth recipes to cure ailments such as sunburns or blemishes.² As the listed ingredients in cosmetic recipes became more obscure, druggists and "patent cosmetic firms" took on the role of production.³ Eventually, by the 19th century and into the 20th century, women across the United States adopted an entrepreneurial spirit and sold their own products out of parlors to their neighbors.

The United States economy waxed and waned in the early part of the 20th century—coinciding with the Industrial Revolution and the first World War—which ultimately changed consumption patterns for many Americans. The economy shifted its focus from small-scale agriculture to large-scale mechanized manufacturing during the Industrial Revolution. Rural agrarian societies transformed into bustling urban centers that greatly impacted the dynamics of class structure and consumption as gaps in wealth became more drastic. The demands of World War I muted the buzz of capitalism on everyday people as spending turned towards the war effort; the popularity of cosmetics, however, did not fizzle out. Although the United States faced recessions between 1910-1912, 1913-1914, and 1920-1921, the cosmetic industry expanded during these periods. Economic studies have revealed that cosmetics are a unique good in that their demand typically rises during times of

² "Cosmetics and Personal Care Products in the Medicine and Science Collections: Make-Up," Smithsonian Institution, <https://www.si.edu/spotlight/health-hygiene-and-beauty/make-up>.
³ Arts Revealed, and Universal Guide (New York: H. Dayton, 1860). https://upload.wikimedia.org/wikipedia/commons/8/8d/Arts_revealed%2C_and_universal_guide_%28IA_artsunivounse%29.pdf, 11.

recession: a phenomenon dubbed the lipstick effect.⁴ Disillusioned from the hardships of war, women looked to small purchases like cosmetics to lift their spirits and subconsciously yearned to feel more attractive in hopes for attaining economic security through a partner.⁵

Society regularly writes off the use of cosmetics as a vain indulgence or an attempt at a false identity. Women are looked down upon if they cross the hazy line of "too much" or "not enough." In this convoluted world of judgement on a good that is already deemed frivolous, academics often purposefully glaze over the history and impact of cosmetics and land on weightier topics. The American beauty culture is therefore not a widely researched field of study. Much of the authorship comes after the second-wave feminism of the 1960s that stimulated women's history. Following generations contributed to the field, such as Kathy Peiss in her book *Hope in A Jar*. Out of this came research into cosmetic regulation, like Gwen Kay's *Dying to Be Beautiful: The Fight for Safe Cosmetics*, which highlighted the fight for legislation in the cosmetic industry.⁶ Nonetheless, the industry during this transitional period between the 1920s and 1930s begs for further study. In this era, the cosmetics industry reflects both the evolution of women's autonomy and its shift from harmless adornment to dangerous beautification.

Science and Modernity of Cosmetics

American citizens became dangerously trusting of science due to the Industrial Revolution and the cultural shift towards modernism, both of which allowed the cosmetic industry to expand its practices. In their race to embrace modernity, American citizens impulsively adopted new products that the contemporary industries invented for them, including cosmetics. Given the nature of the otherwise disillusioning post-war world, economic recession, and lack of workers' rights, the white American middle class needed an outlet to reinvigorate society at the beginning of the 20th century.

The 19th century connected the globe through developments in communication such as postal correspondence, publication, telephones, and telegraphs.⁷

⁴ Sarah E. Hill et. al, "Boosting Beauty in an Economic Decline: Mating, Spending, and the Lipstick Effect," *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*. 103, no. 2 (2012): 27, <https://doi.org/10.1037/a0028657>.

⁵ Ibid.

⁶ Gwen Kay, *Dying to Be Beautiful: The Fight for Safe Cosmetics* (Columbus: Ohio State University Press, 2005).

⁷ William R. Everdell, *The First Moderns: Profiles in the Origins of Twentieth-Century Thought* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1997), 2.

This efficient communication significantly bolstered the global academic community, as scientists could now share new findings and work with one another without substantial delays. By the 20th century, scientific studies became transnational through these advancements that encouraged collaboration, credibility, and accessibility.⁸ Additionally, as the media published articles exposing and updating new developments, everyday folk gained access to scientific discoveries.⁹ Importantly, Americans became invested in the novelty surrounding advancements in chemistry.

In rebellion against Victorian repression, the Modernist movement attempted to set realistic expectations during the gloomy industrialized and disillusioned post-war world. Reassessing the world around them, modernists reacted to modernization by “simultaneously admiring the vitality and inventiveness of technological progress while decrying the dehumanization it [appeared] to bring in its wake.”¹⁰ Though culture expressed itself through art, architecture, and philosophy, the moral values of Americans changed with the influence of this new movement. Within cosmetics, the Modernist mindset allowed consumers to be swept into blindly trusting its “science-based” claims.

The discovery of radium and its entrance to the market highlights how modernity and industrialization paved the way for potentially harmful ingredients in cosmetics. Physicist Wilhelm Rontgen discovered an unknown glowing form of radiation in the late 19th century. By 1896, Henri Becquerel determined the concept of radioactivity, and two years later, Marie Curie named the material radium.¹¹ Though the United States recognized radium relatively slowly, once it entered the media from international sources, its uses only grew.¹² Excitement around the light-emitting substance ran rampant through the scientific community; it changed their comprehension of elements and spurred outlandish theories of its relation to creating life.¹³ As radium gained traction in the scientific investigation, entrepreneurs commodified the substance to take advantage of the frenzy. By the late 1910s, radium toothpaste, hair loss cream, soap, drinking water, pills, and facial cream hit the markets, promising

8 Ibid.

9 William Hale, “Has Radium Revealed the Secret Of Life?” *New York Times*, July 16, 1905, <http://ezproxy.lib.calpoly.edu/login?url=https://www.proquest.com/historical-newspapers/has-radium-revealed-secret-life/docview/96496989/se-2?accountid=10362>.

10 Daniel Joseph Singal, “Towards a Definition of American Modernism,” *American Quarterly* 39, no. 1 (1987): 7–26. <https://doi.org/10.2307/2712627>.

11 Lucy Jane Santos, *Half Lives: The Unlikely History of Radium* (United States: Pegasus Books, 2021), 2.

12 Lawrence Badash, *Radioactivity in America: Growth and Decay of a Science* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1979), 17.

13 Hale, “Has Radium Revealed the Secret of Life?”

cures for such ailments as “diabetes, arthritis, gout, rheumatism, low vitality,” and even erectile dysfunction.¹⁴ Advertising companies captured the novelty in their marketing ploys. In full-page advertisements, Radiator, a toilet requisite brand, boasted their range of products as the first to “embody actual radium.”¹⁵ As radium proliferated through consumer products, the threats remained unknown for a decade.

The Industrial Revolution helped provide the capital required to mass-produce such a frenzy of consumable items. Discoveries in chemistry came out of the industrial emphasis on science and entrepreneurship. Simultaneously, the cosmetic industry expanded as mass production became available. As a result of the Industrial Revolution, by the 1900s, the market leaned towards patented manufactured cosmetics instead of local or privately-owned small brands.¹⁶ These mass-marketed, mass-produced, name branded products with their familiar logos helped to reinforce the unsubstantiated belief in their inherent safety.

Consumption changed along with the market. By the end of the 19th century, women stepped into the public sphere in two ways: participating in new forms of consumption such as shopping and attending the theater, as well as stepping out of the domestic sphere into an increasingly urban workforce.¹⁷ Because of the novelty of the public sphere, the use of cosmetics naturally increased with the broadened exposure to public life. New situations required women to make decisions about their appearance and gave them some control over how they were perceived. The clashing of industrialization with modernity led Americans, and specifically women, to consume cosmetic products at an unprecedented rate. The demand for these mass-produced products led manufacturers to include unknowingly dangerous ingredients whose after-effects would not be discovered until years later.

Acceptance, Hollywood, and the Changing Beauty Standard

As mass production changed the cosmetic industry, the influence of Hollywood changed the standards for beauty. Beauty supplanted wholesomeness as

14 Kate Lister, “At Least Radium Suppositories Aren’t this Year’s Health Fad,” *I*, January 8, 2020, <http://ezproxy.lib.calpoly.edu/login?url=https://www.proquest.com/newspapers/at-least-radium-suppositories-arent-this-years/docview/2334122262/se-2?accountid=10362>.

15 Radiator Toilet Requisites, “Radium and Beauty,” *New-York Tribune*, November 10, 1918, <https://chroniclingamerica.loc.gov/lccn/sn83030214/1918-11-10/ed-1/seq-54/>, 12.

16 Toilet Goods Association, *Trademarks for Perfumes, Toilet Articles and Soaps* (New York: Associated Manufacturers of Toilet Articles, 1926), <https://catalog.hathitrust.org/Record/100959996/Home>. 9-11.

17 Peiss, *Hope in a Jar: Hope in a Jar: The Making of America’s Beauty Culture* (Pennsylvania: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2012), 7.

the key attribute of the cinema's starlets. Beauty was thus viewed as a requirement for the modern woman, which created a need that the cosmetic industry could fill. Styles changed from a subtle application to the more purposeful enhancement of features used in Hollywood's portrayal of makeup in the 1920s; this shift in style created a sudden boom in cosmetic demand. Through this, the use of toxic cosmetics passively increased, as brands produced harmful products without the knowledge of their toxicity until well after consumers began use.

While criticized by many during the early 20th century, the perceptions about makeup shifted by the 1920s to become more accepting of its usage. Until the 1920s, makeup was a taboo topic for women. Because the goal of makeup was to appear as natural, many still saw makeup as unacceptable. Despite the overall increase in access to makeup at the time, much of society still felt relatively apprehensive about its use. "Paint" was the term used to describe modern makeup up until the early 20th century; this highlights how makeup was viewed as suspicious and deceitful. For example, in the 1910s, many outwardly expressed their concern with cosmetic usage. Dr. Crumbine, the dean of medicine at the University of Kansas, addressed his perturbation that "paint" was unnatural and "destroying the complexions" of young women.¹⁸ The fear of women using cosmetics to deceive men into attraction led to terminology like poison to be used in its critiques. Ironically, many of these critics were correct, as various cosmetic products ultimately contained ingredients that seriously harmed their users. As young women yearned for a cure to their insecurities, the discussion surrounding makeup was aggressively negative. Elizabeth Haiken, an author on cosmetic surgery, argues the Victorian cultural belief was that beauty came from "internal qualities" of health and mind, but "by 1921 most American women came to understand physical beauty as an external, independent, —and thus alterable—quality" in which the role of cosmetics came to play.¹⁹ With increasing acceptance by the 1920s, the term "paint" switched to "makeup."²⁰ Critique articles on use of paint slowed by the end of the 1910s, and anonymous advice sections recommended various makeup tips instead of an outright ban.²¹ Though hesitance lingered, the stigma around makeup relaxed by the 1920s.

18 "This Also Is Vanity," *The Lambertville Record*, February 14, 1913, <https://chroniclingamerica.loc.gov/lccn/sn84026089/1913-02-14/ed-1/seq-9/>, 10.

19 Elizabeth Haiken, *Venus Envy: A History of Cosmetic Surgery* (John Hopkins University Press, 1997).

20 Peiss, *Hope in a Jar*, 4.

21 Lois Seed, "Milady Beautiful," *Evening Star*, December 23, 1926, <https://chroniclingamerica.loc.gov/lccn/sn83045462/1926-12-23/ed-1/seq-36/>, 36.

As the mindset around makeup switched, the beauty standard itself changed as well. Hollywood shifted the view of beauty from a nicety to a necessity.²² Herds flocked to the theaters for an escape; thus, young actresses rose to stardom. Pictures of their beautiful faces were plastered across newspapers and magazines, and the actresses became the model for middle-class women.²³ Through developments such as photography and film, women gained access to "a continual comparison to a mass disseminated physical ideal."²⁴ In this way, Hollywood took on the job of marketing. Movie productions were silent films until 1929, so female actresses often applied more makeup to show emotion on screen.²⁵ Once seen as manipulative and threatening, the introduction of Hollywood screen makeup showed cosmetics in a new light. Women saw beautiful actresses on the big screen and wanted to look like them.²⁶ Advertising brands took hold of this urge and marketed cosmetics like mascara and how-to articles based on the industry's stars.²⁷ Maybelline used images of Photoplay names like Mildred Davis to endorse their products, stating "the most beautiful actresses of the screen" used Maybelline.²⁸ With the normalization of a more visible makeup look, the cosmetic industry boomed in the 1920s and 1930s. Classes on how to apply makeup for the movie screen spread across America. According to Virginia Bradford, a \$15 course was filled with many that appeared "ill able to afford the price" but were eager to learn the secrets of Hollywood in the hope to secure a spot in front of the cameras.²⁹ Cosmetics had found their time thanks to industrialization, relaxing morals, changing roles for women, and Hollywood.

How Were They Harmful?

Why were some products forced off the market due to health concerns while others remain in the markets a hundred years later? From the 1920s through 1938, cosmetics were riddled with hazardous ingredients, while both the consumer and the

22 Kelsey D. Lamkin, "The Desperate Drive for Perfection: Changing Beauty Ideals and Women's Fashion in the 1920s," *Inquiries Journal/Student Pulse* 7, no. 2 (2015), <http://www.inquiriesjournal.com/a?id=999>.

23 Maybelline, "Maybelline: Will Beautify Your Eyes Instantly," *Detroit Evening Times*, January 12, 1941, <https://chroniclingamerica.loc.gov/lccn/sn88063294/1941-01-12/ed-1/seq-92/>, 77.

24 Naomi Wolf, *The Beauty Myth* (Harper Collins, 2009), 14.

25 Marvin G. Westmore, "Camouflage and Makeup Preparations," *Clinics in Dermatology* 19, no. 4 (July 1, 2001): 406-412, [https://doi.org/10.1016/S0738-081X\(01\)00180-8](https://doi.org/10.1016/S0738-081X(01)00180-8).

26 Virginia Bradford, "My Adventures In Hollywood," *New Britain Herald*, March 24, 1923, <https://chroniclingamerica.loc.gov/lccn/sn82014519/1923-03-24/ed-1/seq-5/>, 5.

27 Max Factor, *The New Art of Society Make-up* (Max Factor Studio, 1928), <https://www.cosmeticsandskin.com/booklets/max-new-art-1931.php>, 5.

28 Maybelline, "Maybelline: Will Beautify Your Eyes Instantly," 77.

29 Bradford, "My Adventures in Hollywood," 5.

manufacturer were seemingly oblivious to their possible risks. The rapidly growing, unregulated makeup industry used both the new trust in science and the changing beauty standards to market cosmetics in two ways: ingredients-based and purpose-based treatments.

The first type was marketed based on the primary ingredient itself. Today, the same marketing of an active ingredient exists, such as a Vitamin C serum or 2% BHA chemical exfoliant. This form of marketing came out of the cult of modernity and the American yearn for a connection to modern science. For women, cosmetics became the perfect opportunity to buy into science. For example, a century ago, a full range of radium products were sold based on the public's view of radium. Consumers purposefully used radium products because they read about its discovery in the headlines years before. It just so happened that these flashy developments in chemistry were not safe to apply on the skin.

The second kind of harmful product was marketed based upon its purpose. Hollywood had created a new female ideal which created insecurities that consumers felt compelled to fix. Brands then created purpose-based products to fix these new insecurities, including eyelashes that were not dark enough or cupid's bows that did not have the perfect arch. Lash dye, hair dye, and face powder all served their purpose yet happened to contain harmful ingredients. For example, Empress Hair Dye marketed itself as a "perfectly harmless way" to color hair in their newspaper ads.³⁰ Similarly, talcum powders took up an entire section of a drug store advertisement in the Washington Herald Newspaper and provided fifteen different brands of powders for their purpose of staying dry.³¹ Later, products like Empress Hair Dye and talcum powders proved to have harmful long-term effects on their users, such as ovarian cancer and possible blindness. It was a trickier task to eradicate products that were not strictly marketed based on their active ingredients from the market, for the consumers were less aware of the ingredients and, therefore, could not as easily avoid them. The dichotomy of women using harmful products in hopes of beautifying themselves highlights the weight the cosmetic industry held in the delicate area of women's insecurities.

Not all women experienced life-threatening side effects, yet a number of cases were so severe that they resulted in life-altering damage. Between the years

³⁰ Empress Hair Dye, "A Perfectly Harmless Way of Retaining Hair Color," *The Birmingham Age-Herald*, October 23, 1910, <https://chroniclingamerica.loc.gov/lccn/sn85038485/1910-10-23/ed-1/seq-12/>, 12.

³¹ People's Drug Store, "Toilet Article Sale," *The Washington Herald*, July 16, 1919, <https://chroniclingamerica.loc.gov/lccn/sn83045433/1919-07-16/ed-1/seq-7/>, 7.

of 1920 and 1938, reports of disconcerting side effects routinely popped up across the country. When Othine was marketed as a freckle-eraser to "get rid of those ugly spots" in 1921, women eagerly picked it up at their local drug store to achieve the pale, evenly toned skin that was desired at the time. A year after use, users noticed discoloration on their faces. After testing the skin, doctors discovered that the discoloration—grayness of the skin—resulted from a build-up of mercury below the epidermis.³² Mercury is a heavy metal that is highly toxic to humans and affects the nervous system, leading to muscle weakness and difficulty breathing and walking.³³ Similarly, as radium products grew exponentially after its discovery in 1898, they became popularized in the later 1910s. Despite promising the glow of life, five clock dial factory workers died due to radium poisoning in 1925. They had ingested small amounts of radium daily by licking their tiny brushes to keep a fine tip.³⁴ The radium craze then came to a halt after the detection of its carcinogenicity.³⁵ In addition, advertisements such as Armand's Guide to Beauty encouraged the use of toilet waters, but multiple accounts in 1930 exposed that toilet waters, such as the brand Berlock, caused altered pigmentation or dermatitis.³⁶ Likewise, other recommendations at the time included the removal of "superfluous hair" through the use of depilatories, which could temporarily rid an area of unwanted hair.³⁷ When Koremlu came on the market as a new kind of depilatory that "took a skilled French chemist" to develop it, women were eager to try it, as it promised to kill hair at the root for a permanent treatment.³⁸ A year later, hospitals began to receive users of Koremlu suffering from "paralyzed lower limbs, abdominal pain, constant nausea, blindness,

³² Othine, "Freckles: Now is the Time to Get Rid of These Ugly Spots," *The Washington Herald*, June 19, 1921, <https://chroniclingamerica.loc.gov/lccn/sn83045433/1921-06-19/ed-1/seq-57/>, 57; Ruth deForest Lamb, *American Chamber of Horrors: The Truth about Food and Drugs* (New York: Farrar & Rinehart, Incorporated, 1936), 26.

³³ Jon Johnson, "Mercury Poisoning: Symptoms and Treatment," *Medical News Today*, January 9, 2018, <https://www.medicalnewstoday.com/articles/320563>.

³⁴ Taylor Orci, "How We Realized Putting Radium in Everything Was Not the Answer" *The Atlantic*, March 7, 2013, <https://www.theatlantic.com/health/archive/2013/03/how-we-realized-putting-radium-in-everything-was-not-the-answer/273780/>.

³⁵ Special to The New York Times, "New Radium Disease Found; Has Killed 5," *New York Times*, May 30, 1925, <http://ezproxy.lib.calpoly.edu/login?url=https://www.proquest.com/historical-newspapers/new-radium-disease-found-has-killed-5/docview/103577806/seq-2?accountid=10362>.

³⁶ Armand Company, Find Yourself (The Armand Company, 1929), <https://www.cosmeticsandskin.com/booklets/find-yourself-1929.php>; John Lane, M. J. Strauss, "Toilet Water Dermatitis," *Journal of the American Medical Association* 95, no. 10 (September 6, 1930): 717-719, <https://jamanetwork.com/journals/jama/article-abstract/240783>.

³⁷ Dorothy Cocks, *The Etiquette of Beauty*, 192.

³⁸ Koremlu, "Superfluous Hair Removed," *Evening Star*, September 14, 1930, <https://chroniclingamerica.loc.gov/lccn/sn83045462/1930-09-14/ed-1/seq-51/>, 51.

and loosening of teeth and all hair,” diagnosed as thallium poisoning.³⁹ Thallium, lead, pyrogallol, talcum, and a multitude of other unknown substances are included on the list that caused serious diseases aside from the cases explained prior.⁴⁰ The blame for these harmful products is not specific to any individual, yet small chains of events led to the mass distribution of toxic products.

The Need for Regulation and How it Played Out

As Ruth deForest Lamb sat at her desk filtering through the piles of mail in the FDA information office, she opened a letter addressed to President Franklin Roosevelt by an eleven-year-old. Fifth grader Hazel Fay Musser wrote, “My mother suffered a great deal by the cause of some poison which was put in the dye and then applied to the lashes. [She] is totally blind, and we want you to please help us get the law across. I am ten years old and in the fifth grade.”⁴¹ Musser was referring to her mother, Mrs. Fay Musser, who stopped by the salon in preparation to accept a PTA award the evening of May 17, 1933. After being talked into a touch-up on her brows and lashes with dye, she drove home with noticeable irritation in her eyes. Two hours later, she could hardly see, and two months later, she walked out of the hospital blind.⁴² During Mrs. Musser’s stay, nurses recorded her symptoms hourly, which included severe burning sensations, awakening by severe pain around eyes, constant drainage from both eyes, inability to sleep, and so on.⁴³ The use of the cosmetic lash dye resulted in corneal ulcerations in both eyes which sloughed off the cornea, dermatconjunctivitis, or dermato-ophthalmitis.⁴⁴

Lash-Lure, a synthetic aniline dye belonging to the paraphenylene group, was put on the market in 1932. By 1933, a series of articles through the *Journal of the American Medical Association* followed the Lash-Lure incidents.⁴⁵ Ruth deForest

39 Wallace Duncan and Edward Crosby, “A Case of Thallium Poisoning Following the Prolonged Use of Depilatory Cream,” *Journal of the American Medical Association* 96, (1931): 1866-1868. <https://www.ccjm.org/content/ccjom/1/2/113.full.pdf>.

40 Lamb, 26; Nicole M. Fletcher et. al, “Molecular Basis Supporting the Association of Talcum Powder Use with Increased Risk of Ovarian Cancer,” *Reproductive Sciences* 26, no. 12 (December 2019): 1603-12. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1933719119831773>.

41 Hazel Fay Musser to President Franklin Roosevelt, 2 January 1934; Food and Drug Act, January, Proposed legislation (062), General correspondence, 1934, Record Group 88, National Archives, College Park.

42 Sigmund Greenbaum, “Dermatoconjunctivitis due to Lash-Lure, An Eyelash and Eyebrow Dye,” *Journal of the American Medical Association* 101, no. 5 (July 29, 1933): 363-364. doi:10.1001/jama.1933.27430300001010a.

43 Lamb, 16.

44 Ibid.

45 Greenbaum, “Dermatoconjunctivitis due to Lash-Lure,” 363-364; Duncan and Crosby, “A Case of Thallium Poisoning Following the Prolonged Use of Depilatory Cream,” 1866-1868.

Lamb, who opened Hazel’s letter, was so moved that she urged a response from the executive office. Though the message to her higher ups was lost, Lamb began correspondence with the mother of Hazel, a victim of Lash-Lure. Mrs. Musser and Lamb developed a friendship through their letters. The two coordinated a visit to Washington D.C. to speak to officials in hope that Musser’s statement would influence them to make a change.⁴⁶ During this, Lamb gathered her critiques on the lack of regulation under the 1906 Food and Drug Act. Ultimately, she produced a book titled *American Chamber of Horrors* in 1936 with Royal S. Copeland to highlight the need for federal change.⁴⁷

As consumers became aware of the safety concerns of cosmetics, their mistrust of the products grew, and sales began to falter. In the 1930s, local crusaders sparked the movement that would eventually develop into the long-awaited regulation of the cosmetics industry. These isolated advocates would become the small but forceful group of victims, politicians, and activists needed to champion federal regulation. An early form of American consumer product regulation was, as mentioned above, the Pure Food and Drug Act of 1906. It laid the foundation for the Food and Drug Administration (FDA) and prohibited “adulterated, misbranded, poisonous, or deleterious foods, drugs, medicines, and liquors.”⁴⁸ It was unsurprising that cosmetics were excluded from the 1906 act, as cosmetic sales were not significant enough to produce an economic draw that required federal attention. Despite the progressive movement emphasizing consumer protection, cosmetics lay outside of this category in the early 20th century. Ostensibly for good reason, as cosmetics were viewed as fairly safe. Marketed as natural and stemming from home recipes, cosmetics were seen as both economically insignificant and harmless.⁴⁹ With this exclusion, the cosmetic industry began its remarkable growth in following decades, uninhibited by regulation or supervision.⁵⁰

Word spread locally and throughout the medical community about some of these risks. As a result, small numbers of impassioned people published works to educate consumers on the risks of the beauty industry. Mary Catherine Philips wrote *Skin Deep* in 1934 with the goal to inform women on what they were

46 Kay, *Dying to Be Beautiful*, 54.

47 Lamb, 327.

48 House of Representatives, Congress, “21 U.S.C. I - FEDERAL FOOD AND DRUGS ACT OF 1906” <https://www.govinfo.gov/app/details/USCODE-2011-title21/USCODE-2011-title21-chap1-subchap1/summary>.

49 *Arts Revealed, and Universal Guide*, 11.

50 Kay, *Dying to the Beautiful*, 30.

buying by highlighting the serious cases some experienced.⁵¹ Victims who experienced these cases also wrote to public officials pleading for change. A victim of Koremlu, the permanent depilatory, wrote to First Lady Roosevelt to inform her of her story. She wrote, “there are laws to punish people for committing murders [so there should be] something to prevent carelessness that wrecks lives and makes people invalids all of their remaining days, which is far worse than death.”⁵² The FDA was in support of greater restrictions and safety as well. Much of the issue in dangerous cosmetics was not from the ignorance of the FDA, as they did not have the jurisdiction to regulate them.⁵³

The years of tireless activism for cosmetic safety were not actually the initial reason for the passage of the 1938 Food, Drug, and Cosmetic Act. In 1937, the Elixir Sulfanilamide disaster killed 105 patients. Because of the lack of testing requirements, the new drug of improperly prepared sulfonamide antibiotic hit the shelves, resulting in mass poisonings over the following months.⁵⁴ Out of this horrendous wave of deaths emerged change.⁵⁵ Notably, the incident that brought about regulation did not come from a product that was primarily intended for use by women, such as cosmetics. Nonetheless, on December 1st of 1937, Senator Copeland finally introduced Senate Bill S. 3073, which had been in consideration since 1933. Six months later, President FDR put his signature on the 1938 Federal Food, Drug, and Cosmetic Act as a part of his New Deal.⁵⁶

Across a backdrop of sweeping changes in the economy and society, cosmetics became the forerunner of the ubiquitous \$50 billion industry today. Many factors contributed to the dramatic expansion of the cosmetics industry from homemade to mass-produced and from safe to hazardous. Though unintentional, the lack of regulation and false understanding of beauty products allowed toxic and harmful ingredients to make their way onto the faces of consumers across America.

51 Mary Catherine Philips, *Skin Deep: The Truth About Beauty Aids*, (New York: The Vanguard Press, 1934), xi.

52 Lamb, 33.

53 Gwen Kay, “Healthy Public Relations: The FDA’s 1930s Legislative Campaign.” *Bulletin of the History of Medicine* 75, no. 3 (2001): 446–487. <https://doi.org/10.1353/bhm.2001.0126>.

54 “Deaths due To Elixir of Sulfanilamide-Massengill: Report of the Secretary of Agriculture,” *Journal of American Medical Association* 109, no. 109 (1937): 1531, <https://jamanetwork.com/journals/jama/article-abstract/279470>.

55 Robert M. Califf, Jonathan McCall, and Daniel B Mark, “Cosmetics, Regulations, and the Public Health: Understanding the Safety of Medical and Other Products” *JAMA Intern Med.* 177, no. 8 (June 2017): 1080-1082, <https://jamanetwork.com/journals/jamainternalmedicine/fullarticle/2633254>.

56 Federal Food, Drug, and Cosmetic Act 1938, Public Law 717, 52, Stat 1040; June 25, 1938, <https://catalog.archives.gov/id/299847>.

Women’s positions in the public sphere and the influence of Hollywood increased demand for cosmetics, making women more susceptible to the dangerous ingredients that passively surged in the 1920s and 1930s. Concerned citizens and activists like Mrs. Fay Musser and Ruth deForest Lamb rose to fight for further protection for consumers. Remarkably, in the end, regulation was not a direct outcome of the decades of harm that women experienced from using unsafe beauty products; rather, it took one mass poisoning to finally deliver the basic right to safety. Even so, while there was a dramatic increase in market, demand, and products since the 1938 reform, there has not been regulation to follow it. In an industry set to be worth \$571.1 billion in 2023, it is beyond concerning that there is not proper federal supervision.⁵⁷ The rapid expansion of the cosmetic industry in the early 20th century does not compare to the colossal growth the industry has undertaken in the past decades, which points to a need for further regulation.

Ultimately, the amalgamation of the Industrial Revolution and Hollywood influenced the American woman’s need for cosmetic consumerism, which led to a blind trust and eager demand for both ingredients-based and purpose-based treatments. Unfortunately, a number of these unsuspecting women were plagued by life-altering side effects before the need for regulation was finally noticed. Moreover, today, there are tragic parallels between these two periods of unregulated expansion in the beauty market.

57 “Beauty & Personal Care - Worldwide.” Accessed February 16, 2023. <https://www.statista.com/outlook/cmo/beauty-personal-care/worldwide>.

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