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Beauty Is for Everybody. But Is It?

Natalia Formosa

The reasons why beauty fails to address consumers with disabilities and why brands should pay attention.



Image source: Gemini, "Illustration of a vintage perfume bottle with a pump in a pink color scheme, where bottle and background are pink."

Although we've been witnessing the gender and racial gap narrow in the beauty industry over the last few years, there is still a lot to be done. The disparities are gradually being addressed by increasing exposure of female and BIPOC (Black, Indigenous, and People of Color) startup founders, increasing leadership

opportunities for those individuals, and more inclusive consumer-facing marketing efforts. These matters have received long-deserved attention among media outlets, retailers and brands. One group, however, that remains overlooked and marginalized in beauty is the community affected by disability.

Whether it's spina bifida, arthritis, autism, color-blindness or vision loss - there are many physically or neurologically challenged beauty enthusiasts in the world that want to feel included. According to the 2018 report by The American Institutes for Research, there were 20 million working-age adults with disabilities in the US, representing \$490 billion of disposable income after tax.¹ This value was very comparable, for instance, to after-tax disposable income of African American market segment in the same year. Fast forward to 2024, these numbers have likely increased - Centers for Disease Control and Prevention states that 12.1% of US adults had a mobility disability, while 4.8% had vision disability in 2023². Let's keep caregivers and families of those affected in mind too, whose lives are influenced by beauty lovers with disabilities.

It's not just a profit pool for beauty brands to tap into this market segment. It is also an opportunity to incorporate inclusivity and diversity as key brand values and make a difference - make consumers with disabilities feel considered, welcome and a part of the beauty community. There is a handful of beauty brands and products built with inclusive design in mind, however we have not

¹American Institutes for Research, Michelle Yin, Dahlia Shaewitz, Cynthia Overton, Deeza-Mae Smith, "A Hidden Market: The Purchasing Power of Working-Age Adults With Disabilities", April 2018, <https://www.air.org/sites/default/files/2022-03/Hidden-Market-Spending-Power-of-People-with-Disabilities-April-2018.pdf>

² Center for Disease Control and Prevention, "Disability Impacts All of Us", May 2023, <https://www.cdc.gov/ncbddd/disabilityandhealth/infographic-disability-impacts-all.html>

seen this audience being catered to and considered on a larger scale.

Clichéd beauty ideals impact representation in marketing

I was lucky to have interviewed multiple individuals for this article who offered their valuable perspective on the topic. One of them was Ken Labbé known on Instagram as @labbe_arome2.0 who is a digital creator with a disability in the world of fragrance. We spoke about the notion of beauty that exists in our society which is neither inclusive nor diverse: "Well, everybody has their idea of what beauty is, right? And sometimes your idea of beauty is not someone in a wheelchair." The existing beauty stereotypes are what sells mainstream and ultimately adds to the bottom line, hence what we see depicted in beauty advertising.

Natasha Caudill, a makeup influencer with color-blindness and low vision, with millions of views on TikTok, started her channel in 2019 because there was nobody like her online that spoke about makeup and vision impairment. The beauty category wasn't something she could relate to. "I don't know if I have ever seen a makeup campaign with a model wearing glasses. I wear glasses every day and I want to know how my makeup is going to look with glasses on."

In marketing, showcasing product benefit front and center, like eye shadow, is key. However, speaking of representation and relatability to all consumers, there are many opportunities across brand touch points to incorporate such representation and include assets with models in makeup wearing glasses (even as simple as a product display panel's image gallery).

Another issue with advertising is that brands seem to have a specific image of a model with a disability in mind and a specific image of disability representation in a campaign. "Every time you see a person in a wheelchair in a campaign, it's the same type of wheelchair. And there are so many different types of wheelchairs out there." Natasha's friend uses a wheelchair and they often talk about the challenges they notice in society, like the same type of wheelchair or the same type of disability continuously represented in advertising.

Beauty ideals have been ingrained into our brains over the years through repetition - it's like the alphabet we learned at school without questioning its sequence and rationale (which in fact has no logic to it). These beauty standards dictate what beauty brands represent in marketing campaigns. There has been some progress - beauty is not just white anymore and there is more acceptances of size differences. Yet, beauty is still able-bodied.

As a former marketer at Coty, I have to highlight the #UndefineBeauty corporate campaign launched last year focused on unleashing every vision of beauty and changing the norms around what beauty means. The campaign has been well received. These strong corporate-level efforts, however, have not yet been reflected in individual brand campaigns in Coty's portfolio.

Aesthetics and cost efficiency win over accessibility

Given the nature of the beauty industry, packaging has always been (and still is) focused on aesthetics. On-shelf appeal and attractiveness of makeup, skincare, haircare and especially fragrance products are key considerations for product development and brand marketing teams. At the lowest cost

possible. The truth is, accessibility may cost more and require more effort - consider design, packaging development, materials, and usability testing associated with creating an inclusive product. Most brands choose to spend more of their budget on aesthetics than inclusivity.

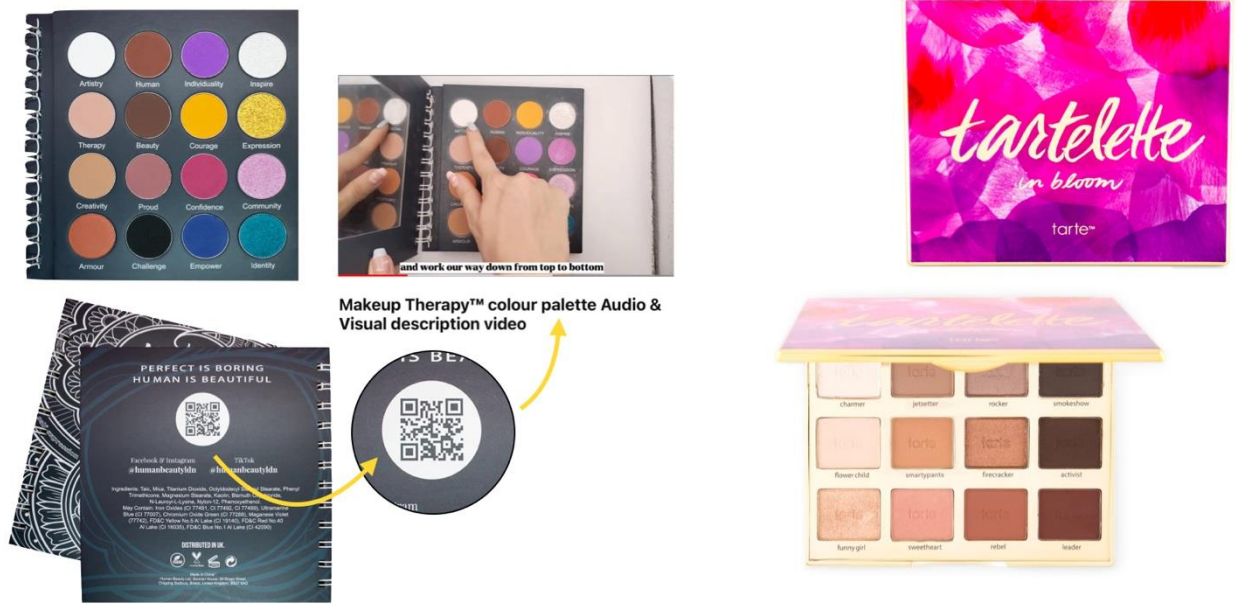
For Millie Flemington-Clare, UK-based founder of an inclusive makeup brand Human Beauty, born with rare genetic condition called Cystinosis (considered an invisible disability), incorporating accessibility in beauty packaging doesn't have to cost more. "Sometimes the simplest of changes can be the most effective". It may be choosing a square mascara tube vs. a round one. Human Beauty's mascara was launched in a square packaging to prevent it from rolling on the floor when dropped and making it easier to twist open. For larger companies that develop custom molds and tool their packaging, addressing accessibility as part of the design is not going to impact the cost significantly.

We've seen companies investing in sustainable packaging despite it driving higher cost of goods. Inclusive design is rarely a consideration. In contrast to product claims around sustainability, there are no guidelines and regulations that define an inclusive product. As Lene Andersen, an award-winning writer and advocate for rheumatoid arthritis community, points out "Inclusive design doesn't have any standards. Anybody can say this is inclusive whether its design is inclusive or not".

Incorporating inclusive design as a brand attribute doesn't necessarily mean that the product will work for everyone. It's about including more people and making products easier to use for everybody. For the consumer with a disability, noticeable lack of consideration by brands is one of the biggest barriers to beauty.

For Lene, lack of inclusion demonstrates “deliberate exclusion” in today’s world: “Part of my lack of interest [in beauty] compared to 10 years ago is that beauty is not accessible to me. You see something and then you look at what it takes to get there. After a while you stop going where you feel excluded”. Imagine going to a nail salon for a gel manicure and realizing your hand (affected by deformity caused by arthritis) doesn’t fit in the lamp. Millie adds “[Many experiences by the disabled community] are dehumanizing.”

Most people who aren’t affected by a disability don’t think about inclusivity. Consider making an eye shadow palette or a nail polish accessible to a color-blind makeup enthusiast like Natasha. When the way you see the world is like a black and white movie, the names of colors on packaging matter a lot. Brands are coming up with very cool and catchy names - take OPI Spice Up Your Life or *Verified* nail polish colors, or Activist and Funny Girl shades in the Tarte eye shadow palette for instance - but they don’t tell you anything about the actual color. This makes it inaccessible to color-blind consumers and requires them to go on a website to check the color descriptions or leverage an app to recognize and understand the colors. Human Beauty was able to solve for that by incorporating a QR code on the packaging with video and audio content explaining the colors. It’s a relatively easy solution any makeup brand could include in their packaging to make everyday use easier for everyone.



Human Beauty Makeup Therapy color palette with audio & visual description on Youtube
Image source: humanbeauty.co.uk

Tarte Tartelette in Bloom color palette
Image source: amazon.com

Color cosmetics see the most progress

Out of all beauty categories, makeup has shown the most effort at addressing consumers with disabilities. From smaller makeup brands like Human Beauty or Guide Beauty that are focused on creating inclusive makeup products to bigger brands like Urban Decay with the line of ergonomic eyeliners, Estee Lauder's makeup assistant app for visually impaired consumers and L'Oreal's latest computerized makeup applicator called HAPTA, we're seeing signals of disability considerations in the beauty industry.

In the nail and hair removal space, CVS Beauty introduced "one+other" in 2023³, a brand offering inclusive beauty essentials (for example, easy to hold and squeeze tweezer, nail clipper,

³ PR Newswire, "CVS Pharmacy introduces new universal tools collection from one+other", July 2023, <https://www.prnewswire.com/news-releases/cvs-pharmacy-introduces-new-universal-tools-collection-from-oneother-301883483.html>

cuticle nipper) designed to make self-care more accessible. This launch was well thought out in a way that it incorporates easy to open packaging, and tactile cues to distinguish between the tools. The line was developed in collaboration with members of the disability community.



***Universal Tools Collection by the CVS brand one+other.
Image source: PR Newswire.***

Haircare and skincare are slower to adopt inclusive design but show some progress. Skincare brands like Humanrace and Biotherma incorporate Braille on their packaging (yet the first one for brand name only and the latter on outer packaging only). For the last few years, Herbal Essences has been using tactile notches on their bottles to help visually impaired consumers distinguish between shampoo and conditioner. It's a basic usability feature that allows for the correct product choice in the shower, for anyone with reduced vision.

Fragrance remains pretty dismissive about including consumers with disability. While working in fragrance for the past 2 years, I am personally not aware of a launch, campaign or product development process that incorporates (or considers) inclusive design. Ken's experience in reviewing fragrances with inclusive

design in mind hasn't been positive either "I love great big bold packaging, but it's so difficult sometimes [...] I don't want it to be complicated. Most times, you know, my disability is complicated."

Given the lack of options or alternatives, "people with disabilities become very clever in how to use products" says Millie. Lene told me about using a makeup brush to apply moisturizer because she is unable to reach her forehead otherwise. What early stages of addressing accessibility can mean for brands is educating consumers on different ways of using their products in regard to disability challenges. It can be as simple as educational content on or in a package and across social channels.

Makeup, skincare and personal care brands have at least shown that they are trying, but the progress that we're seeing is slow. True and authentic inclusivity is 360 and long-term

Disability representation in beauty (if any) is usually momentary and then it's gone. Or it considers only one aspect of disability but not others that are equally important. Oftentimes it seems like a product was created for people with disabilities by people that don't have a first-hand experience with disability or have not consulted with consumers affected by a disability.

Urban Decay's ergonomic liquid eyeliners have received positive reviews for usability by customers with dexterity issues - easy to hold, apply, allowing for more control. However, the packaging is hard to read, failing to address people with low vision. This launch, although appreciated by beauty consumers with disabilities, seems to be a one-off initiative as opposed to becoming a part of the product development process across all launches.

A makeup tools brand Guide Beauty was created with inclusive design at its core. Its products allow for easy makeup application. The brand's positioning is all about inclusive design and product ergonomics. However, it could benefit from a more community-focused approach like that of Human Beauty, which seems to be more believable. Both brands, however, are driving progress in promoting inclusive design. Kohl Kreatives is another brand that contributes to the positive change through its collections of makeup brushes that are designed for consumers with motor disabilities.

Humanrace is a brand I would like to highlight for doing a great job at beauty representation. It's latest limited-edition launch in partnership with Tyler, the Creator - the signature green nail polish - showcases a representation of hands in its product gallery. From long nails and dark skin tones, short nails and lighter skin tones to various ages and hands affected by arthritis, the hand model images feel relatable, real and inclusive.



le FLEUR[®] x Humanrace Nail Polish product gallery featuring a representation of hands.
Image source: [humanrace.com](https://www.humanrace.com)

Recently, more brands started inviting beauty influencers with disabilities to their product launch and brand events. Many, however, don't consider accessibility using a 360-degree view. Think about an influencer on a wheelchair invited to a beauty event at a venue that is not accessible without secured disability

assistance for them. It's not authentic, not believable and may be perceived as a PR tactic rather than a real effort to include the community affected by disability.

On the other hand, we're noticing a trend in the beauty industry where companies focus on product innovations around accessibility that are digitized and technologically advanced. Take L'Oreal's new invention HAPTA, the world's first handheld computerized makeup applicator. Although the device is a breakthrough product, there are some accessibility considerations. The cost of the device (estimated between \$150 and \$200⁴) is too high for most beauty consumers with disabilities. According to Millie "It can't be over-engineered and expensive because part of the problem and a barrier to accessibility is cost." Lene had a similar reaction "I'm looking at this and it looks great, it also potentially looks heavy, and how much does it cost. If it's over \$70 I'm not buying it." Distribution, availability and price are key factors to consider when designing for the beauty consumer with a disability. Holistic inclusivity, across all brand and product touchpoints is what's truly believable.

Lack of representation in leadership roles

A large part of the problem contributing to existing discrimination of the beauty consumer with a disability is lack of representation of such individuals in leadership and management among beauty companies. People without a disability won't think about accessibility because it doesn't affect them. Unless it gains higher

⁴ CNN, "This L'Oreal device aims to help people with limited mobility apply makeup", January 2023, <https://www.cnn.com/2023/01/05/business/loreal-hapta-ces/index.html>

awareness in the industry or becomes a trend - like the sustainability boom over the last few years.

According to the Disability Equality Index 2023 list for "Best places to work for disability inclusion"⁵, we're seeing a lot more beauty retailers listed than beauty brands. Although corporations like L'Oreal , P&G and Unilever have received the highest score, that doesn't necessarily translate to representation in decision-making and management roles, where a voice in the room is needed to advocate for (or at least educate and raise awareness about) beauty consumers with disability.

What I have heard from each and everyone I interviewed for this article is the need and preach for engaging with the community affected by a disability to receive feedback and insight on what this community is thinking. Whether it's increasing representation in upper management roles, including leaders with disabilities on company boards, working with disability consultants, or simply ongoing outreach and engagement of consumers with disabilities, brands should rethink how they approach their DEI (diversity, equity, inclusion) efforts in everything they do. Currently, inclusive design and disability considerations in strategy, marketing, advertising and product innovation are rather an afterthought, a standalone project or a PR (public relations) initiative - not a part of internal processes, bigger mission, company values and approach. Stronger engagement with content creators with disabilities, due to their increasing visibility on social platforms, is the first step many brands are taking.

⁵Disability:IN, "2023 Best Places to Work ", <https://disabilityin.org/what-we-do/disability-equality-index/2023companies/>

Consumers with disabilities continuously learn how to advocate for themselves. Many don't talk about their disability. Many struggle with confidence. Many feel separated by society. Beauty is a category that allows for self-expression, confidence boost, the feel-good factor, the mood uplift. Beauty is for everybody. And everyone has the right to feel beautiful. What we would like to see from beauty brands is consideration for inclusive design and support in normalizing the disability in our society by driving representation and acceptance.

Special thanks to my interviewees for sharing their perspective and contributing to my piece:

***Ken Labbé* (Instagram: @labbe_arome2.0) is a content creator focused on reviewing fragrances with disability consideration in mind.**

***Natasha Caudill* (Instagram: @natashac44, TikTok: @natashacaudill) is a beauty content creator at the intersection of makeup and color-blindness with over 1.3M followers on TikTok.**

***Lene Andersen* (Website: yourlifewithra.com) is an award-winning writer, disability advocate and author of "Your Life with Rheumatoid Arthritis" book.**

***Millie Flemington-Clare* (Instagram/TikTok: @humanbeautyldn) is a founder and CEO of Human Beauty, an award-winning makeup brand focused on driving representation, accessibility and inclusive design in beauty.**

Sources:

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4. **CNN, "This L'Oreal device aims to help people with limited mobility apply makeup", January 2023, <https://www.cnn.com/2023/01/05/business/loreal-haptaces/index.html>**
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