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Toxic Beauty

Growing up, I vastly remember my parents using Johnson & Johnson baby powder until I was around the age of 4 or 5. I would assume that because my older brother and I were no longer wearing diapers, our parents no longer found the product to be a necessity and stopped purchasing the beloved powder. Like many young girls, I went through a stage of experimentation, trying on my mother's makeup and lipstick, and eventually as I got older, I was able to purchase my own. As a preteen, I would go to the mall and buy body mists from Bath & BodyWorks and eventually transitioned over to perfume and I was appalled to learn that perfume is an endocrine disrupter. As the documentary progressed, more cosmetic products that I have used were being discussed. I remember my first introduction to actual nail polish and not the peel away kind that was sold to kids. There was no surprise when watching the documentary and reading on the screen that nail polish was harmful because as soon as a bottle is opened, the fumes that fill the air are very potent.

I was aware of a few harmful ingredients that were listed but I was unaware of the number of FDA approved ingredients. Lead in lipstick, Mercury in Skin Cream and Formaldehyde in Shampoo had me gasping in shock. Formaldehyde in Shampoo puzzled me the most because formaldehyde is used when a deceased person is being embalmed, so a living person using shampoo with that ingredient is very sinister. It was extremely disheartening to see the amount of banned ingredients/chemicals in the United States compared to Europe, and even Canada. The EU has banned 1394 ingredients, Canada has banned 459, and the United States has only banned 11! It is extremely grotesque to knowingly ignore how dangerous products are for the entire American population, especially with how deadly they are.

In 2014, I decided that I no longer wanted to continue the cycle of getting perms and/or relaxers and I did a “big chop”, letting go of all processed hair, allowing my hair to grow and flourish in its natural state. At the time, there was an influx in black women going natural and many of these women were on YouTube discussing the ingredients in the products they were using and from there I learned about ingredients to be cautious of like silicone, parabens, phthalates, and sulfates. I found a black owned haircare brand that was free of the ingredients listed above and purchased their hair conditioners, shampoos, leave ins, and pretty much anything I could get my hands on. This brand would eventually get acquired and the difference in the products texture, scent, and overall use was immediate. Once the brand was acquired, certain ingredients were added and I’m almost positive they were added because they’re cheap and the company was able to cut costs. The sad reality is most women, especially women of color have to use products that are harmful and full of toxic chemicals because of the products price point and accessibility.

In the midst of the pandemic, when vaccines were becoming available, there was a lot of pushback from the public, questioning the effects and the purpose of the vaccine. It made me wonder and I started thinking about other facets like food and cosmetics and began to inquire as I wanted to be more conscious of not only what I put on my body but what I put inside of my body. With the help of TikTok, I was introduced to an app called “Yuka” which allows you to use your back phone camera to scan the label on products and from there it gives you a 1 through 100 rating of said product, as it lists ingredients and explains why each product is rated the way it is.

As the end of the documentary was nearing, I went into my bathroom and began re-examining a few products like deodorant that I specifically bought because it was advertised as being aluminum free. It never crossed my mind to look up whether my eyeshadow palettes contained talc and I pulled out my phone and Googled, “what eyeshadow brands contain talc?” and the first website link I saw was from the Environmental Working Group. I clicked the link and immediately went straight to the search bar and typed in my deodorant brand and scent and saw the EWG rating the deodorant had. Although it had a score of 2, which falls under the category of Low Hazard, there was a breakdown of the ingredients and I found out there was a moderate amount of talc in my deodorant. For all the years that I have been using this deodorant, I was under the impression that there were no toxic ingredients and although it is *moderate*, it was very unsettling to see.

My purchasing habits will definitely change because of this documentary. I am currently in my 20’s, and these years are considered a woman’s childbearing years and although I do not want to have kids now, I do however want kids when I’m in my 30’s and like MyMy Nguyen, I too wonder whether or not I will be able to have children and concerns of cancer flood my mind. I was raised being taught that I make all of the choices in life, and it is up to me to decide whether I want children or not and I’m realizing that it might not actually be up to me to decide because what I consume and put on my skin are purposefully damaging my reproductive organs. Rose Marie is the first person interviewed in the documentary and she was told by an ex formulator that, “the cosmetic industry is destroying women’s cells. C-E-L-L-S. Cells”, and those in charge are just turning a blind eye. The entire world is discussing pollution, our oceans and sea life but those same wastes are already in our bodies. What is the point of preserving the planet if those of us living here are being poisoned? There won’t be anyone left.

It was very emotional hearing how Mary Krpan, Mel Lika, Deane Berg, Shaeda Farooqi, Chantal and Beverley Robinson found out they had cancer because these could be women in my family and I believe majority of these women were under the age of 50 when they got their diagnosis and it was heartbreaking because all of these women had and have so much life to live. Mary, Mel and Jacqueline Fox were never able to take their claim to trial because they sadly passed away before their date and to me it is as if they were silenced, the use of Johnson and Johnson silenced them and they should be here today to tell their story. Hearing Deane Berg say she was laughed at in the courtroom by doctors and lawyers was disturbing because they are some of the professions we’ve been taught to trust but huge corporations with billions of dollars have them in their pockets and they’re not speaking the truth, they’re saying what these large corporations want them to say.

I do not want to live my life as health anxious or as a hypochondriac but having to constantly wonder or worry about your health because of products and ingredients is nerve wracking. I’m very appreciative that I was informed about this documentary because I probably would’ve went the rest of my life not paying attention to products that I’m using because it isn’t something that is expected.

References

Ellis, Phyllis, director. *Toxic Beauty*. *YouTube*, 27 Jan. 2020, https://youtu.be/8-iZe25BcVw. Accessed 25 Apr. 2023.