

Minimalism in cosmetics – can less also be more?

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What does really matter and what is unnecessary? A lot of people ask themselves such kind of almost philosophical questions on their lifestyle to find an alternative plan to today's excessive consumption. Are such minimalistic considerations also significant in the context of cosmetic care?

The concept of minimalism obviously is a new trend and means to concentrate on essential things of life and refrain from a lot of "nice-to-haves". To put it simply and more drastic: You don't have to buy tools if you have a Swiss pocketknife.

This, of course, is excessively exaggerated and cannot be transferred to the cosmetic care. Nevertheless, the question is permitted in which areas female/male consumers can reduce consumption without cutting down on the quality of life or refraining from vital things. To answer these questions both perspectives need to be considered – the cosmetician's aspects but also the viewpoints of consumers.

Packaging

Discussions on packaging and dissenting opinions on this issue are not of recent date, though. It is a fact that the manufacturing of packaging often is more expensive than the contents – in particular if an outer packaging or even gift set is added to a fancy dispenser or jar. Reducing the packaging actually is not a sales-promoting tool in this context and can even be counterproductive taking into account that customers select certain products for representational purposes. The situation is different if the public already is conditioned on the need for reductions and economy and focused on what is essential in life.¹ In this case, further steps towards minimising unnecessary things certainly are sales promoting and sales supportive tools. Difficult to say which conception proves to be more beneficial for the institute since product sales actually only are part of the business while the essential element of the commercial activity is the effective cosmetic treatment.

Overdone skin care

¹ Lautenschläger H, Tiegel, Tuben, Spender & Co – Verpackungen in der Kosmetik, Beauty Forum 2011 (10), 48-51

The minimal customer expectations in beauty institutes are effective cosmetic treatments. Efficacy however no longer is guaranteed if there is more treatment than needed. This applies to the treatment in the institute but also at home. It is a misconception that an overdone skin treatment² will not do any harm and this misconception already makes itself felt in the wallet. Also the skin may show other reactions than expected.

- Overdone hygiene measures increase the risk of barrier disorders and infections.³
- An overdosage of lipids in skin care creams supports the growth of anaerobes and thus causes skin blemishes. Occlusive skin care down-regulates the natural regenerative activity of the skin⁴.
- Experience has shown that frequent and long-term chemical peelings increase the incidence of perioral dermatitis and rosacea⁵.
- A routine addition of UV filters in day creams causes vitamin D deficits⁶.
- An overdosage of antioxidants affects the melanin formation⁷.

² Lautenschläger H, Überpflege – Einfach zu viel des Guten, Kosmetik International 2015 (3), 22-25

³ Lautenschläger H, Die Barriere schützen – Hautpflege bei Pilzinfektionen, medical Beauty Forum 2013 (4), 48-50

⁴ Lautenschläger H, Akne - Möglichkeiten der kosmetischen Prävention, Beauty Forum 2015 (2), 88-91

⁵ Lautenschläger H, Gesichtsreinigung – Inhaltsstoffe & Geräte, medical Beauty Forum 2018 (1), 14-17

⁶ Lautenschläger H, Sonnenschutzprodukte – gezielt anwenden, medical Beauty Forum 2014 (2), 16-18 und Beauty Forum 2015 (2), 64-67

⁷ Lautenschläger H, Antioxidantien und Radikalfänger – zu viel ist zu viel, Ästhetische Dermatologie (mdm) 2015 (8), 12-16

- Apparent all-purpose products with a myriad of active agents in low dosage reduce the efficacy of individual active agents and increase the risk of allergic reactions – in particular if various extracts are used.

This only is a small selection of examples which indicate that reductions should be considered. Efficacy is not affected here – on the contrary, customer benefit increases. A conditioned psyche however is a formidable obstacle to reductions.

Cosmetic additives for more convenience

Most of the cosmetic preparations contain cosmetic additives that are not serving skin care purposes but increase physical, chemical and microbiological storage stability. Economically speaking, they increase the minimum shelf life and minimise early spoilage.

A typical example are emulsifiers, synthetic antioxidants and complexing agents as well as preservatives which reduce production costs all the more the stronger their effects are due to the fact that they then can be added in very low concentrations. With fair pricing they also reduce consumer spending; it should however be mentioned that the use of above-mentioned agents frequently collides with the actual cosmetic purpose of providing optimum skin care without the risk of irritations and allergies.

To put it the other way round: an overall avoidance of such substances would be an excellent alternative for the skin. However, this so-called "without" philosophy only can be put into effect with formulations that finally raise the production costs and hence also selling prices. It should however also be mentioned that statements such as "no parabens" do not necessarily indicate a reduction of such substances, as it can be assumed that another preservative listed in the annex of the German Cosmetic Directive (Kosmetikverordnung – KVO) has been added instead.

Chemistry but also Mother Nature offer a whole variety of other substances that are, admittedly, not beneficial for the skin but help spreading preparations on the skin, create a smooth skin surface or emit gentle fragrances.

A minimalistic concept largely avoids such substances however accepts the fact that only a minor percentage of consumers responds to such kind of preparations. A lot of persuading is required in this case which, however, is facilitated if customers with problem skin are involved. They often are well informed and very consequent when it comes to selecting their preparations.

Counterproductive substances

Up to what extent individual substances are counterproductive frequently depends on the individual skin condition. While sensitive skin may show allergic reactions to a preservative, the figuratively-speaking "thick skin" also applies in this case and means it is completely immune to such substances. Substances to reduce the sensitivity of the skin have been developed in recent years.⁸ These substances make the skin less sensitive to external irritations, however, they also involve that reactions to potentially irritating components of skin care products are suppressed. Already in 2003, the German Federal Institute for Risk Assessment (Bundesinstitut für Risikobewertung – BfR) has objected to such kind of substances. They certainly do not fit into a realistic concept of minimalism in cosmetics.

In particular the harmful substances often not listed in the declaration⁹ because they are substance impurities are another type of components that we can well do without, such as

- unwanted heavy metals in pigments
- side products resulting from the production of synthetic substances
- aromatic hydrocarbons (MOAH = Mineral Oil Aromatic Hydrocarbons) and polycyclic aromatic hydrocarbons (PAH) in mineral oil components

In order to recognize such substances behind the different INCI component terms, comprehensive expert knowledge is required to be able to avoid them.

The situation is different with endocrine disruptors¹⁰. Although availability of data sometimes is ambiguous and there sometimes only are suspicions due to their chemical structure and in-vitro studies, they can be clearly identified in the INCI-declaration. In case of doubt they should be put on the own private list of substances to avoid.

It is more difficult with substances that are prone to chemical reactions with atmospheric oxygen and hence only form allergenic reaction products during their application. Belonging to this group are several essential oils, but also synthetic substances which for instance can react with fashion jewellery and then release allergenic nickel.⁹ Carcinogenic nitros-

⁸ Lautenschläger H, Reizlindernde Stoffe, Kosmetik International 2017 (1), 114-116

⁹ Lautenschläger H, Versteckte Schadstoffe, medical Beauty Forum 2018 (4), 14-17

¹⁰ Lautenschläger H, Endokrine Disruptoren – Schaden fürs Hormonsystem, Kosmetik International 2018 (1), 52-55

amines result from the reaction of amine-containing components with atmospheric nitrogen oxides. Already some time ago there have been restrictions set up on the part of the German Cosmetic Directive which however are limited to nitrite-splitting components.

Environment and degradability

Considerations on a minimalistic concept are not necessarily restricted to the exclusion of ineffective substances that are counterproductive for skin and health. It is a question of personal priorities whether and to what extent environmentally relevant criteria play a role in the individual consumer behaviour – such as pollution caused by inert plastics, the release of heavy metals from resistant complexing agents in water bodies or the formation of dioxin from chloroaromatic preservatives and antiseptics, just to mention a few examples.

Also the claims of vegans regarding the exclusion of animal substances indirectly belong to these aspects, considering the industrial animal farming as such and its secondary effects on the environment.

A minimalistic concept also involves that we are not taken in by each and any hype coming on the scene. It is exactly the environmental issue that unnecessarily allures into buying anti-pollution cosmetics¹¹ or so-called “detox” products. There is no doubt that most of environmental pollution is attributable to cultural impact and that individuals personally and willingly accept the risk of pollution. If customers so far have seen to reasonable skin protection and to moderate skin cleansing routines there is no need to worry. Nevertheless there are also “scientific” studies dealing with the risks of all kind of particulates for the skin. It is however a fact that only a fraction of the studies is reliable and grounded in reality.¹² Just as for any other studies relating to other issues, it makes sense to personally scrutinize the reports regarding their scientific substance but also try to find out the financial backers.

Modular cosmetics¹³

Instead of getting consumers to search the cosmetic market for adequate preparations that fit objective and personal needs regarding unwanted substances, the modular cosmetics sector takes another path. It provides sera,

often with one active agent only, in adequate concentrations and with a minimum of cosmetic additives.

The different sera are compatible with each other and hence can be mixed with each other or incorporated into base creams, base gels or base lotions, which means that they can be adapted to the needs of the individual skin.

A treatment with modular systems however requires a lot of practical dermatological experience and knowledge in skin diagnosis – above all regarding the implementation of the measured data into specific mixtures. The resulting preparations then only contain the substances needed by the individual skin for the treatment in the institute or for the skin care at home. All the criteria regarding substances to use and substances to avoid can thus be observed. This actually is the kind of practical work where the cosmetician can bring in her very own expertise and avoid the majority of specific prefabricated compounds. Investments into storage can thus be considerably reduced. However, there is a legal pitfall within this minimalistic variant which tends to be neglected in a successful institute focused on modular cosmetic treatments. While the compounding of specific preparations that are declared as finished products in the German Cosmetic Directive (KVO) is part of the daily routine in the institute, the sale of individually prepared products for the cosmetic care at home is only allowed in the form of a proven customer service. Everything else as for instance keeping such compounds in stock illegally falls within the definition “production” involving that the statutory framework usually is not given in the institute. Since sera and bases are independent finished products according to the German Cosmetic Directive (KVO), they can of course be sold as such. Customers can mix them themselves or apply one after the other – first the sera and then the bases.

Conclusion

There is a considerable potential for minimalistic approaches in the field of cosmetics. The question asked in the headline whether “less can also be more” can clearly be answered with “yes” if taking customer benefits as a starting point. [This opinion however may not always be shared in the marketing and financial departments of manufacturers.](#)

Dr. Hans Lautenschläger

Remark: [The original publication does not contain the blue coloured parts](#)

¹¹ Lautenschläger H, Anti-Pollution-Kosmetik, medical Beauty Forum 2017 (3), 12-15

¹² Lautenschläger H, Studien in der Kosmetik – Was ist wahr?, medical Beauty Forum 2018 (3), 14-18

¹³ Lautenschläger H, Modulare Kosmetik, medical Beauty Forum 2017 (1), 26-29