Friday, April 5, 2024 / The Sephora kids

[HALF SECOND OF SILENCE]

[BILLBOARD]

NOEL: Generation Alpha is obsessed with skincare, as explained by a member of Generation Alpha.

*NOEL: What’s your skincare routine? Walk me through everything that you do.*

*ELLIE: Oh boy, okay.*

<SCORING IN> Wheels Within Wheels

*ELLIE: So I get up and I wash my face. I use two cleansers. I go in with moisturizer. I use, like, this rosewater spray from Trader Joe's. I go in with another moisturizer, and then I go in with my, like, SPF sunscreen. And then I use a toner, which is probably like my favorite part of skincare. It makes my skin, like glowy and not so dry, which is what I'm going for.*

NOEL: Ellie is -

*ELLIE: And then I use like two different eye moisturizers.*

NOEL: El -

*ELLIE: Because sometimes my eye bags can be bad in the morning.*

NOEL: Ellie is fourteen, going on Sephorty.

*ELLIE: I just go in with this like revive serum and it just, like really makes your face glowy…*

NOEL: She’s glowy regardless, but on Today, Explained: kids have become fixated on skincare. And a multibillion dollar industry has found a new customer base. Is this .. OK?

<SCORING OUT> Wheels Within Wheels

[THEME]

NOEL: It’s Today, Explained. What convinced poreless Gen Alpha that it needed skincare? Something, something social media.

<SCORING IN> Kids interlude

*<CLIP> YOUTUBE: JONATHANJOLY*

*EDIE: Hey guys! So I've gotten so many comments asking me to do a skincare routine. So here you go.*

NOEL: So, from YouTube and TikTok, they descend on Sephora.

*<CLIP> TIKTOK:*

*@ChastityNolan: I convinced my mom to take me to Sephora. So let's do a Sephora haul.*

NOEL: Frequently, it does not go well.

*<CLIP> TIKTOK:*

*@DelanyKalea: Sephora employees are not your babysitters.*

NOEL: They’ll buy anything, but there’s one brand they really covet: Drunk Elephant.

*<CLIP> TIKTOK:*

*@oliviaphadiades: I was just on the floor helping people out, and this little girl came up to me, obviously asking if we had the Drunk Elephant bronzy drops. This was the time when they were so incredibly viral that they weren't in stock literally anywhere.*

<SCORING OUT> Kids interlude

JESSICA: The Drunk Elephant tweens are kids from 8 to 13 who are absolutely obsessed with skincare. They're also known as the Sephora kids, and they have been dominating the conversation, as of late, around skincare and beauty trends.

NOEL: That’s the editor-in-chief of Allure, Jessica Cruel.

JESSICA: That is my real last name. <laughs>

NOEL: <laughs> I love it, Ilove it. She’s like, and then I went into fashion.

JESSICA: Yes.

NOEL: What is a, what is a Drunk Elephant? I say, sounding my age.

JESSICA: <laughs> Drunk Elephant is a skincare brand that was founded back in 2013 by someone named Tiffany Masterson, and the brand is known for really amazing formulas that have great active ingredients and has colorful packaging.

*ELLIE: So it's like white with, like, black lettering. But then somewhere within the product, it has like a color. And it just I think it makes it fun. Honestly.*

NOEL: When I was 13, it was like Saint Ives Apricot Scrub and Bonnie Bell Lip Smackers. And the thing was, you could buy those for a couple bucks.

JESSICA: Yeah.

NOEL: Is Drunk Elephant like, super cheap? Is it allowance friendly?

JESSICA: Definitely not. Drunk Elephant is more in the, kind of, 30 to $80 price range. So it's a little bit more than what we were spending at the drugstore when we were preteens.

*ELLIE: If I have saved up enough money, I could technically buy it, but I think I, wait for, like, Christmas or my birthday, and therefore my parents, or, like, my family will buy it for me.*

JESSICA: You know, I've been in this industry for some time, so I was around when they first launched, and even then they were very popular among, you know, women who were in their late 20s, 30s, 40s and above. They're very efficacious and that's why they're popular. If someone younger wants to use drunk elephant, they have other things that might be appropriate for that age group, but just not the things that are heavy on the actives.

NOEL: Let's talk about the science here and what an “active” is.

JESSICA: Yeah.

NOEL: “Retinol,” “antioxidants,” I feel like those words became something very familiar to me when I hit maybe 32, 33.

JESSICA: Yeah.

NOEL: It was like, OK, you got to be smearing these on, you’re old now. And, but certainly not when I was 13. What do these actives, what do they actually do?

<SCORING IN> Tiny yak science class

JESSICA: So actives are things like retinol salicylic acid, alpha hydroxy acid vitamin C. They are the most potent part of a formula. They are what give you the effects of brightening or anti-aging in some cases. Although, you know, that's not necessarily something that we support at Allure. These are the things that are going to give you the effects that you're looking for.

NOEL: I'm reading between the lines here. The thing that you're, you're saying Allure doesn't necessarily support is the idea that every person who is aging should try to look much younger.

JESSICA: Yes, in 2017, we banned the term “anti-aging” in our coverage.

NOEL: <gasps> No! Whoa.

JESSICA: Yes!

NOEL: It is a whole new world out here.

JESSICA: Yes, because we believe that this idea that you can reverse age is not the reality. The only way to stop aging is to die.

NOEL: <laughs>

SCORING BUMP

JESSICA: And so it's an inaccessible ideal. We cannot reverse time. And so we wanted to stop supporting that message. Now if you want a lower your do your healthier skin, we respect that and understand that because that's what you had when you were eight, when you were a drunk elephant tween.

<SCORING OUT> Tiny yak science class

NOEL: To some degree. As a geriatric millennial, I, you know, anti-aging is something that I think I'm okay with the idea in general. I wish I looked 29 again some times.

JESSICA: Right.

NOEL: Not all the time, but sometimes. But but I think the big difference is when I was 13 I was not trying to look seven. What, what are, what are the children doing? Are they…do they think they look old?

JESSICA: Not at all. We've been doing some reporting as of late, where we are talking to people between the ages of ten and 13, along with their parents, and they are much more educated about the skincare market than we give them credit for. So what we're hearing is that they watch TikTok, they watch YouTube, and they see people like Alix Earle, who has 6.5 million TikTok followers.

*<CLIP> TIKTOK:*

*@ALIXEARLE: You guys know I'm obsessed with the Drunk Elephant bronzing drops, and they just came out with these.*

JESSICA: Or Katie Fang.

*<CLIP> TIKTOK:*

*@KATIEFANGGG: I feel like skin prep is so important. I always want to look like I'm shiny.*

JESSICA: And they want to emulate that routine. It's a part of being in the in-crowd.

NOEL: Let's talk about both pros and cons. The con I mean look, it's it's silly and it's expensive.

JESSICA: Right.

NOEL: Do the active ingredients…is there any science telling us the actives that you talked about might be hurting youthful skin? Or is it just like, no you guys don't really need it?

JESSICA: No. It can be harmful if done incorrectly. Right? So an eight year old using retinol or vitamin C that's unnecessary. They're too harsh for young skin. And if a child does use those things it can cause irritation. Perioral dermatitis, which is kind of a rash around the mouth. That's, that's not good. I think also what we're seeing is this kind of smoothie cocktailing trend where people are mixing a lot of products together. That's also unnecessary. That's when you can get irritation on young skin.

*ELLIE: I'm still pretty young, so my skin isn’t aging just yet, but the reason why I also like people who maybe a little older like Drunk Elephant, is because some of their products have retinol in them, and that is something that teens should be staying away from. So not all of their products have it, but some of them do.*

NOEL: Jessica, how old are you?

JESSICA: I'm 34.

NOEL: OK, so you might be slightly too young, but do you ever have that thing where you, like, you just like, look at a young person's skin and just want to, like, touch it?

JESSICA: I mean, it's so bouncy, it's so bouncy and dewy and gorgeous and they've got the good stuff. But I think, you know, in general, what they really want is that dewy effect.

<SCORING IN> Fugue for Mugue - APM

JESSICA: But when we talk to dermatologists, they do say that there is a positive to this whole thing, and that is they are getting into a routine of taking care of their skin early.

NOEL: Hmm.

JESSICA: If we think about…if we were using sunscreen at ten, what those effects could be as far as the rate of skin cancer in the world. It could be game changing.

NOEL: Yeah.

JESSICA: And so the routine that dermatologists we've spoken to at allure recommend is a gentle cleanser, a basic moisturizer, and a sunscreen, preferably a mineral sunscreen. If we can have that habit started at the preteen stage, that is only going to benefit them as they go through life.

NOEL: Hm.

JESSICA: I also think, you know, at this time, puberty is happening earlier than it ever has. The average age of a girl going through puberty is about 11. Skin changes during that period. Just like it changes during menopause because of hormonal changes, right? So that's when we get acne coming in. And that's when we might be adding things like salicylic acid, right? That's the same thing that we used to use with our Neutrogena pads and things like that. But in general, the whole idea is gentle, keep the barrier, the skin barrier, intact and safe and protected, and wear your sunscreen.

<SCORING OUT> Fugue for Mugue - APM

NOEL: Do you think these young people tell us anything about the future of of beauty, about what we're going to admire 20 years from now? When they're adults.

JESSICA: What we're seeing now is actually something that's very similar already in the Asian beauty market. You know, South Korea is the kind of beacon of skincare technology and skincare culture. And in that culture, children grow up knowing the importance of a skincare routine. And I think that has many different effects. I think, also, it's…what's happening in the industry with this age group is people are becoming more knowledgeable, which I think is important. People are becoming more accepting as well. When we talk about acne, there's a huge surge in acne patches and they're not the clear ones. They're yellow, bright stars. They will go to school wearing an acne patch.

NOEL: It looks cute, yeah.

JESSICA: It's cute. It's not shameful to have acne to a certain extent. Right? And so I think they have a lot more self-esteem, self-confidence in certain areas, than we give them credit for.

<SCORING IN> Sunken Cruiseship

JESSICA: I think that doesn't totally nix the negatives that we have around social media and that social media causes. But social media, one of the positives is that we have so many different, diverse faces and beauty types that are being highlighted and people are able to really see and try different things that I think is just amazing.

NOEL: Jessica Cruel, editor-in-chief of Allure. And you heard Eliana Litvak, 14, you can call her Ellie. She’s my niece! Coming up: to borrow Jessica’s words: we’re not going to nix the negatives. There is a downside to the skincare obsession.

<SCORING OUT> Sunken Cruiseship>

[BREAK]

[BUMPER]

REBECCA: My name is Rebecca Jennings. I am a senior correspondent at Vox covering internet culture.

NOEL: Perfect. Okay, so earlier in the show, we were talking about tweens, some children, some young teens who really love skin care. And they're trying to get what we learned is called the dewy look. What are things in this realm looking like for people who are a little bit older than 9 or 10? <laughs>

REBECCA: <laughs> So right now on the internet, there's all this discourse that Gen Z is supposedly “aging like milk.:

NOEL: <laughs>

REBECCA: And this essentially…which is to say bad as opposed to wine, which ages well. <laughs>

<SCORING IN> Triangle time

*<CLIP> TIKTOK:*

*@TAYLORDONOGHUEE: Tonight I was on live with my boyfriend and someone was like, ‘how old's your girlfriend?’ And Jon jokingly responds, 47. And the girl comments, ‘oh, I thought she was early 30s’…I am 23!*

REBECCA: Basically, this led to another trend where regular people on TikTok were like, people keep saying Gen Z is aging like milk. So like, how old do you think I look?

*<CLIP> TIKTOK:*

*@HANNAH\_LEIM: You want to be humbled? Ask TikTok how old you are. I'm 29. People have always thought I've looked young. I thought.*

REBECCA: And anyone who's been in the internet knows that this is a really bad idea. And, because people are mean.

*<CLIP> TIKTOK:*

*@HANNAH\_LEIM: But TikTok thinks I'm like 40.*

REBECCA: From there, it kind of stemmed into this whole thing where people have all these conspiracy theories about why this is…

*<CLIP> TIKTOK:*

*@JORDAN\_THE\_STALLION8: It is mainly because of the stress*

REBECCA: …and whether it's even really happening.

*<CLIP> TIKTOK:*

*@JORDAN\_THE\_STALLION8: I am Gen Z and nobody ever believes me. When my mom and I walk out in public, people think that my mom is my younger sister.*

REBECCA: So things are weird in the what-are-people-aging-like world.

<SCORING OUT> Triangle time

NOEL: So is there, is there any evidence that Gen Z and millennials are actually aging faster than Gen X and the boomers did?

REBECCA: I mean, no. Like these, these are conspiracy theories and like they are based on a handful of TikToks. I think a lot of it stems stems from the fact that people look really different online than they do in real life. It's really hard to tell people's ages on the internet. Everyone is kind of smoothed out. People just, like, look more similar online. Like when we see someone IRL, it's like we see like more clearly, more depth, whatever. When you get all these people of all these different ages in a row online. They don't look like that different. I think that's a big part of it. Another one is I think a lot of, you know, Zoomer women grew up on YouTube tutorials. They learned how to do make up really well from a really young age.

*<CLIP> YOUTUBE TUTORIAL:*

*JAMES CHARLES: Gonna use a little bit of this using the 410 brush. This one does come in my brush set.*

REBECCA: People just naturally look older when they have on makeup. full stop. And so they've been kind of making themselves look older for their whole lives. And I think there's a real conflation between looking good and looking older when these things actually mean two different things.

*<CLIP> TIKTOK:*

*@HANNAH\_LEIM: Do I look? 40. Do I look 40? How old do I look, bud?*

NOEL: We talked to my 14 year old niece earlier, and she has like a nine-step skincare routine for her, like plump, delicious little face. What are, what are 20 and 30-somethings doing to, to look to look younger or to preserve what they already have?

REBECCA: Yeah. I think, like in any point in history, people will do anything and everything they can to preserve, preserve their youthful skin. We have these really involved skin care processes. And I think now it's sort of swung back to a little bit more simple. It's like moisturizer, sunscreen, retinol, retinoid. These are the most important things that people can do to, preserve their skin. But I do think there is a little bit of like a pendulum swing back from, you know, injecting your face with a ton of fillers, because I think we've seen a lot of examples where that can go really wrong.

*<CLIP> ITV NEWS:*

*JAMES WEBSTER, ANCHOR: First, tonight, a makeup artist from Jersey has told ITV channel she could barely look in the mirror after having a lip job that went horribly wrong. Joe Baron's filler was injected into an artery by mistake.*

REBECCA: And now I think a lot of people are really interested in like laser treatments, facials, things that you can go to get at, like an esthetician or a dermatologist that aren't going to have the potential to make you look a little overdone in the way that I think we've seen a lot of in the past ten years.

NOEL: How big is the anti-aging industry? And is it growing, or is it is it always been a thing?

REBECCA: I think you would not be surprised to learn that it is extremely growing.

<SCORING IN> Fugue for Mugue APM

*<CLIP> CNBC: How K-Beauty Took Over Global Skincare*

*ANDREA MILLER, PRODUCER: Sephora has started their own skincare line, Kylie Jenner launched Kylie Skin, and even Amazon is offering its own line. Part of the reason? Skincare has a higher margin business than cosmetics.*

REBECCA: So according to data from Euromonitor International, the anti-aging market grew, from 3.9 billion in 2016 to $4.9 billion in 2021. And that's in the U.S. alone; in the world it went from $25 billion to nearly $37 billion during that same period.

<CLIP> ARIRANG NEWS:

*ANCHOR: South Korea is the world's third largest cosmetics exporter after France and the United States. Cosmetics, in fact, are a bigger export for Korea than home appliances, pharmaceuticals and mobile phones.*

REBECCA: I also don't think you'll be surprised to learn that so much of that growth, as as much as 49% of like skincare is growth is coming from Gen Alpha, which is to say like, tweens.

<SCORING OUT> Fugue for Mugue APM

REBECCA: These things that were once sort of just the province of celebrities and people whose job it is to like, look really pretty. Now, this is this is everyone's province because we're all living our lives very openly online. None of us have, you know in human history, we were never meant to look at ourselves this much, and our appearance has never meant so much.

NOEL: Hm!

REBECCA: And regular people are just more visible than ever. And that, just, like, adds to people's own obsession with the way that they look. And I think a lot of it is pretty logical. In fact, you know, it's it's kind of seen as this really vain thing to do, but it's also very understandable.

NOEL: I love the idea that we just weren't meant to be looking at ourselves this much.

REBECCA: <laughs> Yeah.

NOEL: You're laughing, but I'm like, that is profound. Maybe I will take that with me through this day. Let me ask you about…we talked about this recently in a series that we did on Ozempic. There's an idea that society is moving forward and becoming more inclusive of different looks, more body positive. How do you balance the idea and possibly the truth, that we're becoming more inclusive with respect to looks, with the idea that our beauty standards, again always seem to point to youth, youth, youth, youth and whatever beautiful happens to look like this week.

REBECCA: Body positivity really blew up in the 2010s because of social media.

*<CLIP> MARIE CLAIRE:*

*JESSAMYN STANLEY: Being fat is really just a description. It's just saying I'm larger. Like if you look it up in the dictionary, it doesn't say anything about being stupid or ugly.*

REBECCA: Because before that there was just magazines and, you know, commercials, and Hollywood and music, like, telling us what to look like, and then all of a sudden you get this, like, explosion of other people's voices on the internet calling for body justice, fat liberation.

*<CLIP>*

*DOVE #MYBEAUTYMYSAY CAMPAIGN: As a fashion blogger my style is 100% unapologetic…*

REBECCA: But then what happens is like the culture industries swallow that up and then they sell it back to us.

*DOVE #MYBEAUTYMYSAY CAMPAIGN:*

*Speaker 1: My beauty*

*Speaker 2: My beauty*

*Speaker 3: My beauty*

*Speaker 4: My say.*

REBECCA: And of course, like like they're gonna, like, try to get you to buy their products and buy. And one way to try to get people to buy their products is upholding this aspirational ideal that people don't already have, so if you want someone to buy something, you have to make them feel like they're lacking in some way.

*<CLIP>*

*DOVE PHILIPPINES AD: Dove is different, with one fourth moisturizing cream for softer, smoother skin.*

*WOMAN: Your skin looks beautiful.*

*SDOVE PHILIPPINES AD:: For smoother, more glowing skin, it must be Dove.*

REBECCA: That's, that's a really good sales pitch and that, of course, upholds these really, really like anti-human ideals that we are always striving for.

NOEL: Do you, do you think that any of this leads anywhere good?

REBECCA: If enough people call for sort of like aging justice or body justice, which which did happen to an extent with the rise of social media. Like they will then swallow that up in return. And I and I don't think you can say that that body positivity on social media did nothing because we really do see a lot more diversity of bodies and every, every form of diversity because of social media. But I also think, you know, I'm clearly a cynic here and like, you know, this is this is all in service of getting us to buy things and to watch things and to feel a little bit bad. And that's just something that, like every person that engages with the beauty industry, must know on some level. That's not to say that like if you buy makeup or skincare, you're a bad person. I do that all the time and I find great joy in it. But like when it comes to self-worth. And like, you know, comparisons to people whose job it is to look really pretty, that's where you know, it leads to just a big generation feeling like they're not young enough, they're not thin enough, they're not whatever enough. And when these ideals keep changing, which they just always will, because once something becomes like too accessible, then it will become, like, less cool or less, you know, interesting. Then the ideal will change.

<SCORING IN> Sunken cruiseship

REBECCA: And so it's you. Will never get there basically.

NOEL: <laughs>

REBECCA: And so true acceptance within yourself is, the only path to feeling even a little bit OK.

NOEL: Vox’s Rebecca Jennings. You heard from a bunch of TikTokers including: Jordan Howlett, Alix Earle, Katie Fang. Today’s show was produced by Haleema Shah and edited by Matthew Collette. Laura Bullard is our fact-checker and Patrick Boyd engineered. I’m Noel King. It’s Today, Explained.

<SCORING OUT> Sunken cruiseship

[10 SECONDS OF SILENCE]