BEAUTY WITHOUT BORDERS

A CONVERSATION WITH SARAH QAZI, BEAUTY AND WELLBEING MARKETING DIRECTOR FOR ARABIA AT UNILEVER, ON THE EVOLVING BEAUTY CONSUMER, THE CONVERGENCE OF CATEGORIES AND CHANNELS, AND WHAT GLOBAL BRANDS CAN LEARN FROM THE REGION.



INTRODUCTION

For decades, the beauty industry operated within clearly defined boundaries. Professional products belonged in salons, prestige brands lived behind department-store counters, and mass beauty dominated supermarket shelves.

Today, those lines are increasingly blurred. Consumers move naturally between a salon consultation, a dermatologist's recommendation, a social-media review and a pharmacy or online purchase. Science has entered everyday beauty conversations, premium is no longer defined by price alone, and innovation can emerge from any category or channel.

In Arabia, this evolution is particularly dynamic. Beauty is deeply connected to culture and ritual, yet consumers are also highly digital, trend-aware and open to experimentation. They expect global innovation, local relevance and products that respond to their individual needs.

We spoke with Sarah Qazi, Beauty and Wellbeing Marketing Director for Arabia at Unilever, about the forces reshaping the industry, the growing connection between professional and consumer beauty, and what the next generation of beauty experiences could look like.

UNDERSTANDING THE ARABIA BEAUTY CONSUMER

An increasingly informed consumer with high expectations of both performance and relevance.

From your perspective leading Beauty and Wellbeing marketing across Arabia, how has the region's beauty consumer evolved in recent years?
The beauty market across the GCC continues to be volatile, fragmented, and competitive expand, fuelled by rising disposable incomes and a growing focus on beauty and wellness. But beneath this growth lies a powerful shift in consumer behaviour: as e-commerce and health & beauty channels expand in an increasingly crowded ecosystem consumer expectations are rapidly evolving toward personalized, digital-first experiences and purpose-led brands. The beauty consumer across Arabia has become significantly more discerning, informed, and intentional in how they make choices. While the market continues to grow, what is most notable is the shift in how consumers define value. Value is no longer driven by aspiration alone- it is shaped by eAicacy, ingredient credibility, simplicity, and wellbeing. And that means premiumization itself must evolve. Today, consumers are no longer simply looking for products that promise beauty benefits. They want visible results, credible science, ingredient transparency, and brands that feel relevant to their lifestyle and values. At the same time, we're seeing a polarization of spending habits. Some consumers are willing to invest in premium products that deliver proven performance, while others are becoming more selective, choosing trusted essentials that oAer strong value. What is disappearing is the middle ground: products that command a premium without a clear reason why. We're also seeing beauty and wellbeing increasingly converge. Consumers no longer separate looking good from feeling good. They are seeking solutions that support confidence, self-care, wellbeing, and appearance together. This shift is creating new opportunities for brands that can combine eAicacy, purpose, and emotional relevance.

Consumers now have access to more reviews, expert voices and product information than ever before. Has this made them genuinely more knowledgeable—or simply more exposed to information?
I would argue it has done both. Consumers today have unprecedented access to information, but exposure alone does not equal understanding. What has changed is that consumers have become far more capable of navigating and filtering information than they were even a few years ago. They are increasingly fluent in ingredients, formulations, routines, and eAicacy claims. We regularly see consumers discussing concepts such as skin barriers, scalp health, peptides, ceramides, or hydration technologies that would previously have been limited to experts. They are asking more sophisticated questions and holding brands to higher standards. However, the sheer volume of content also creates confusion. That is why trust has become one of the most valuable currencies in beauty. Consumers are increasingly looking for scientific proof, genuine reviews, and communities they trust. The brands that win are not necessarily those that create the most content, but those that help consumers make sense of it and make confident choices.

Arabia is often discussed as one market, despite significant differences between countries and consumers. How do you balance a regional strategy with the need for cultural and local relevance?
This is one of the most important challenges and opportunities in our region. At a strategic level, there are common forces shaping beauty consumption across Arabia: digital adoption, rising expectations around eAicacy, the growth of e-commerce and health & beauty channels, and the increasing overlap between beauty and wellbeing. These trends allow us to develop regional platforms that are scalable and consistent. But consumers don't experience beauty in a regional way. They experience it through local culture, climate, rituals, and everyday realities. The UAE's highly diverse and globally connected consumer base behaves diAerently from Saudi Arabia's deeply engaged beauty consumer, where beauty rituals, fragrance, and self-expression play an important cultural role. Elsewhere in the region, we see diAerent priorities around skincare, premiumization, and trend adoption. For us, the answer is to think globally about purpose and innovation, but locally about execution. The brand proposition, science, and innovation may be consistent, but how we bring that to life through creators, content, partnerships, commerce, and cultural moments must be locally relevant. The most successful brands today are not those that simply localize global campaigns. They are those that understand the nuances of each market while remaining connected to a clear and consistent brand story. In many ways, the future of beauty marketing is finding the right balance between scale and intimacy.

BEAUTY WITHOUT BORDERS

Consumers no longer define their routines according to traditional industry channels.

Professional, prestige and consumer beauty once operated in separate worlds. What is driving their convergence, and are we moving towards one connected beauty ecosystem?
I believe we are already moving toward a much more connected beauty ecosystem. Historically, consumers discovered trends in prestige or professional beauty before they gradually filtered into the mainstream. Today, digital platforms, social commerce, creators and global connectivity have dramatically accelerated that process. A salon treatment, a dermatologist recommendation, a luxury product launch and a mass beauty innovation can all appear in the same consumer feed, often within minutes. At the same time, consumers are becoming increasingly outcome-focused. They are less concerned with where a product sits within the industry's traditional hierarchy and more focused on whether it delivers the result they are seeking. Whether that solution comes from a salon, a premium skincare brand or a consumer beauty brand matters less than eAicacy, credibility and relevance. The rise of ingredient-led beauty, expert voices and wellbeing-focused routines is further blurring these boundaries. Consumers now build routines rather than shop ▸▸

categories. They combine products, services and experiences from multiple beauty worlds to create personalized solutions for themselves. As brands, this means we must think beyond category definitions and focus on the broader consumer need. The future is less about separate beauty channels and more about a connected ecosystem where expertise, innovation and consumer trust can move fluidly across them.

Today's consumer may combine an accessible everyday product with a premium treatment and a professional salon service. How has this changed the way brands think about positioning and the overall beauty journey?
This is one of the biggest shifts we are seeing in Arabia today. Consumers no longer think in terms of "mass" versus "premium." Instead, they curate portfolios of products and services that fit different needs, occasions and budgets. A consumer might use a trusted everyday shampoo, invest in a premium scalp serum, and visit a salon for specialized treatments, all as part of the same routine. This requires brands to think less about owning a category and more about owning a role within the consumer's beauty journey. Positioning today is increasingly built around specific needs and moments rather than price points alone. Consumers are asking: What problem does this solve? What benefit does it deliver? Why should I trust it? This is particularly relevant in the GCC, where we see both premiumization and affordability existing simultaneously. Consumers are willing to spend more where they perceive meaningful value, but they are equally discerning about where they choose to save. The result is that brands must clearly articulate their contribution to the overall routine, whether that is efficacy, wellbeing, expertise, convenience or accessibility. The winners will be the brands that understand how they fit into a broader ecosystem of beauty solutions rather than viewing themselves in isolation.

Where do you see the greatest opportunities for professional and consumer beauty to learn from one another?
There is tremendous opportunity for mutual learning. Professional beauty has traditionally excelled in expertise, diagnosis, education and building trust through highly personalised recommendations. Consumers increasingly seek that level of credibility and guidance, creating opportunities for consumer brands to bring more expert-backed experiences, science-led communication and personalised solutions into the mainstream. Conversely, consumer beauty has often led the way in scale, accessibility, cultural relevance and speed. Consumer brands are exceptionally good at identifying emerging behaviours, participating in culture and making innovation available to millions of people. Professional beauty can benefit from adopting some of that agility and consumer-centric thinking. Perhaps the greatest opportunity lies in combining the strengths of both worlds. Imagine professional-level expertise delivered through the accessibility of consumer brands, or consumer-scale innovation strengthened by deeper consultation and diagnostics. In Arabia, where beauty engagement is among the highest globally and consumers are highly digitally connected, there is a real opportunity to create a more seamless journey that connects expert knowledge, premium experiences and accessible innovation. Ultimately, consumers do not care where an idea originates. They care whether it helps them look and feel their best. That's where both professional and consumer beauty can meet.

INNOVATION BEYOND THE PRODUCT

Innovation is no longer limited to discovering a new ingredient or launching another formula.

What does meaningful beauty innovation look like today? Can a brand innovate through education, accessibility or experience without necessarily launching a new product?
Absolutely. Meaningful innovation today is about creating greater value for consumers, and that value isn't always delivered through a new formula or ingredient. In Arabia, consumers are navigating an increasingly complex beauty landscape. They have access to more information, more products and more opinions than ever before. Innovation therefore has to help simplify decision-making and improve outcomes. That can come through product innovation, but it can equally come through better education, personalization, diagnostics, or experiences that help consumers identify the right solution for their needs. A brand that helps a consumer understand scalp health, choose the right hydration routine for the Gulf climate, or build a regimen that delivers visible results is innovating in a meaningful way. We're also seeing innovation through accessibility. Making expert knowledge, premium experiences or science-led solutions available to more consumers can be just as impactful as launching a new ingredient. Ultimately, the most successful innovations today are those that remove friction and create confidence. Consumers are asking less "What's new?" and more "What genuinely works for me?"

Across haircare, skincare and beauty wellbeing, are consumers beginning to expect the same fundamentals—visible results, scientific credibility, personalization and ease of use?
Increasingly, yes. Consumers in Arabia may engage with different categories for different needs, but the standards they apply across those categories are becoming remarkably consistent. Whether they are buying a facial serum, a hair treatment or a wellbeing supplement, they want proof that it works. They are looking for visible results, credible science, trusted ingredients and solutions that fit easily into their everyday lives. What's particularly interesting is how skincare has influenced expectations across the broader beauty ecosystem. Consumers have become accustomed to ingredient-led storytelling, efficacy claims and personalized routines, and they now expect the same level of sophistication elsewhere. At the same time, convenience remains critical. Today's consumer wants effective solutions that integrate seamlessly into busy lifestyles. They are willing to invest time and money where they see value, but they increasingly favour products and routines that make that value easy to achieve. Across all categories, the consumer expectation is becoming: "Give me a solution that is proven, relevant, simple and personalized."

Skincare has influenced haircare through conversations around scalp health, ingredients and targeted routines. What other ideas or innovations do you see moving across beauty categories?
One of the biggest trends we're seeing is the migration of wellbeing thinking across beauty categories. Consumers increasingly view beauty as part of a broader wellbeing journey. Concepts like prevention, longevity, recovery, self-care and holistic health are moving beyond skincare into haircare, body care and even beauty supplementation. We're also seeing greater interest in diagnostic and personalized routines. The idea that every consumer's needs are unique, which has long been established in skincare, is increasingly shaping haircare and body care as well. Another area is the rise of treatment-based behaviour. Consumers are moving beyond maintenance toward more targeted solutions, whether that's advanced hydration, scalp care, skin barrier support or age-related concerns. They are building routines around outcomes rather than categories. Importantly, category boundaries are becoming less relevant. Consumers are not thinking, "This is a skincare trend" or "This is a haircare trend." They are looking for solutions that help them look and feel their best, and they expect innovation to move seamlessly across categories

With consumers constantly presented with something "new," how does Unilever determine which trends represent lasting behavioural change and which are likely to disappear?
The distinction we at Unilever look for is whether a trend is solving a deeper consumer need or simply generating short-term excitement. In beauty, trends come and go quickly, particularly in today's social-first environment. But behind many trends are enduring shifts in behaviour that deserve our attention. For example, the rise of scalp health is not simply a trend. It reflects a more fundamental consumer understanding that healthy hair begins at the scalp. Similarly, the convergence of beauty and wellbeing reflects a lasting change in how consumers define beauty itself. We look carefully at whether a behaviour is being adopted consistently across markets, channels and consumer groups, and whether it aligns with broader shifts in lifestyles, health priorities or consumer expectations. Importantly, we combine consumer insight with science and market data. A viral moment may drive interest, but sustainable growth requires evidence that the behaviour addresses an unmet need and will continue to matter beyond the next social cycle. For us, the most valuable trends are not those that are talked about the most. They are the ones that reveal how consumer expectations are fundamentally changing. Those are the shifts that shape where we innovate, where we invest and how we build brands for the future.



TECHNOLOGY AND THE FUTURE OF BEAUTY

How data, digital tools and human expertise could shape more personal beauty experiences.

Social media has transformed how consumers discover products and engage with brands. Has it created a more open and democratic beauty industry, or made trust more difficult to establish?
I believe it has done both. Social media has democratized beauty in a way we have never seen before. Consumers across Arabia no longer rely solely on brands, retailers, or traditional media to shape their beauty choices. They can access reviews, routines, ingredient education, expert opinions, and real-life experiences instantly. It has given consumers a stronger voice and enabled smaller brands, niche innovations, and local creators to compete alongside global players. At the same time, the sheer volume of content has made trust more complex. Consumers are exposed to thousands of recommendations every day, many of which can be contradictory. As a result, trust is increasingly shifting away from celebrity endorsement alone towards a combination of science, expert validation, authentic reviews, and communities people genuinely trust. In Arabia, where beauty engagement is especially high and creator influence plays a significant role in shaping decisions, brands must earn credibility continuously. The winners will be those that combine cultural relevance with proven efficacy, helping consumers navigate information rather than simply adding to the noise

How do you see artificial intelligence influencing beauty—from understanding consumer needs and identifying trends to offering more personalized recommendations?
AI will fundamentally reshape how beauty brands understand, serve, and engage consumers. Historically, we ▸▸

relied on periodic research to understand evolving needs. AI enables us to listen continuously. By analyzing search behavior, social conversations, content engagement, and emerging trends in real time, brands can identify shifts in consumer interests much earlier and respond more quickly. In Arabia, where consumer trends move rapidly and beauty conversations happen across multiple languages, platforms, and communities, this capability becomes even more powerful. It allows brands to detect emerging routines, ingredients, concerns, and cultural moments as they develop, rather than after they have become mainstream. The second major opportunity is personalization at scale. Consumers increasingly expect recommendations, content, and experiences tailored to their specific needs. AI can help create more relevant product recommendations, customized content journeys, and targeted beauty solutions that reflect individual concerns, preferences, and lifestyles. Ultimately, AI enables brands to move from broad segmentation to a much deeper understanding of consumers as individuals, creating experiences that feel more useful, relevant, and personal.

As technology becomes more influential, where will human expertise remain irreplaceable—particularly in professional services, consultation and education?
Technology can provide information, but human expertise provides interpretation, empathy, and confidence. Beauty is highly personal. While AI can help analyze skin concerns, recommend products, or identify patterns, consumers still value the reassurance that comes from speaking with someone they trust. Whether that is a dermatologist, a hair professional, a pharmacist, or a beauty advisor, human expertise brings context that technology alone cannot replicate. This is particularly important in Arabia, where beauty has strong cultural, emotional, and social dimensions. Consumers are not simply seeking technical advice; they are often looking for guidance, education, and confidence in their choices. Human experts help translate science into practical, personalized recommendations that fit individual lifestyles and aspirations. I also believe professional services will become even more valuable in a technology-enabled future. Rather than replacing experts, technology will augment them, allowing professionals to deliver deeper insights, more tailored consultations, and better outcomes. The future is not AI versus expertise; it is AI enhancing expertise.

Looking ahead to the next decade, what shift do you believe beauty leaders should begin preparing for today?
The biggest shift is that beauty will increasingly move from a product-centric industry to an outcomes-centric industry. Consumers will care less about categories and channels and more about the results they want to achieve. They will expect integrated solutions that combine beauty, wellbeing, science, technology, expert guidance, and personalized experiences. The traditional boundaries between skincare, wellness, diagnostics, professional services, commerce, and digital experiences will continue to blur. We are already increasingly seeing this in Arabia, where consumers increasingly view beauty and wellbeing as interconnected rather than separate pursuits. They expect products that deliver efficacy, support wellbeing, and fit seamlessly into their lifestyle. Premiumization is also evolving, with consumers demanding proof, credibility, and measurable outcomes rather than aspiration alone For beauty leaders, the implication is clear. We need to prepare for a future that is science-led, data-enabled, deeply personalized, and increasingly centered on trust. The brands that succeed will be those that combine technological capability with genuine human understanding, helping consumers not just look better, but feel better and live better too. ■



CROSSING THE LINE

AGREE, DISAGREE OR "IT DEPENDS"—THEN EXPLAIN.

"Consumers are more influenced than educated."
I agree because I think consumers are influenced first and educated afterwards.

"Premium beauty is now defined by performance, not price."
I think it depends. If a brand is really cool and has the ability to do so, it can probably go beyond price. However, some mainstream brands are still very price-sensitive.

"Sustainability is an expectation, not a differentiator."
I agree. Ten years ago, sustainability was a differentiator; now, it simply needs to be done. Just look at global warming—we're dying!

"Professional beauty is no longer exclusive to the salon."
I agree. As I mentioned, everyone wants to experience professional beauty everywhere.

"The future of beauty is categoryless."
I 100% agree. What matters is the experience and the outcome, regardless of how or where consumers get it—through a treatment, product or service.

Complete the sentence: "Beauty in 2035 will be..."
Led by devices and supplements.