

**The P.R.E.T.T.Y Campaign: remediating the effects of toxic toiletries.**

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### **The P.R.E.T.T.Y Campaign: remediating the effects of toxic toiletries.**

The term 'remediation' means to rectify or stop something, particularly regarding environmental damage. Throughout this course, I have become aware of an immense amount of environmental issues I had never learned about. I was also able to find out about different media strategies and the issues that are involved with them. This includes topics like digital waste, wilderness conservation as well as varied perceptions of the environment. For the final group project, my group and I wanted to use the material we have learned to create a campaign that aims to remediate the effects of toxic cosmetics.

People use several different hygiene and/or makeup products throughout their lifetime. Each of these cosmetic products contains dozens of chemical compounds like additives, fragrances, preservatives, etc (Bilal et al., 2020, p. 1). These chemicals are harmful to our bodies in several ways, however, there is a devastating environmental impact involved since the process of creating cosmetics (from packaging the product to the substances themselves) requires a large amount of environmental resources. Moreover, when individuals are done with these cosmetics, they often wash them off which means that active residue from the products end up in water bodies and affects the aquatic ecosystems in several different ways over time (Bilal et al., 2020, p. 1). Additionally, these toxins enter the environment through crop fertilisers that use sewage sludge from wastewater processing. This is a clear example of slow violence. 'Slow violence' is a term coined by Robert Nixon which means "violence that occurs gradually and out of sight" (Nixon, 2011, p. 2). While climate change and deforestation are some common examples that have been explored in this course, the effects of toxic cosmetics are a unique form of slow violence that is applicable to both humans and the environment (also an example briefly introduced in class).

According to Juliano and Magrini (2017), despite many chemicals being somewhat successfully removed from the water during sewage treatment, large amounts still find their

way into the ocean. For instance, parabens are preservatives used for their antimicrobial qualities in cosmetic products like shampoos and lotions (Juliano & Magrini, 2017, p. 6). These have an average removal rate of over 90% from wastewater treatment plants; however, there still exist large amounts of this preservative in rivers (Bilal et al., 2020, p. 2). As a result, paraben traces have been found in the tissue of fish as well as marine birds. Further studies have proven that the presence of parabens will directly affect the endocrine system of these creatures which further affects their reproductive systems and fertility (Juliano & Magrini, 2017, p. 7). This would disrupt the food chain and consequently, the aquatic ecosystem. Parabens affect the human endocrine and reproductive systems, particularly males (Bilal et al., 2020; Juliano & Magrini, 2017). This is because parabens are present in tap water and absorbed by our skin from the products we use.

Robert Nixon (2011) asserts that there exists a major challenge when informing individuals about slow violence issues because they are not dramatic enough to create public awareness through typical media channels like the news. Therefore, it was imperative that we choose a strategy that would still “rouse public sentiment” (Nixon, 2011, p. 3). However, there are examples of media that focus on the dangerous effects of the cosmetic industry like the 2019 documentary film “*Toxic Beauty*” (Phyllis Ellis, 2019). The film involves the victims, survivors, lawyers, scientists and politicians involved in the J&J lawsuit regarding the link between personal care products and breast cancer. (*Toxic Beauty*, n.d.). The diversity of the people featured as well as the narrative techniques employed inspired the group to create a campaign that would be eye-catching and informative in a similar manner to the film.

When we were formulating our communication/media strategy further, the “*Impact Field Guide*” (2020) proved to be useful, even though it focuses on documentaries. The group came to the conclusion that the campaign would focus on two out of four “impact dynamics” (*The Impact Field Guide*, n.d., slide 69). Specifically, it would focus on ‘changing

minds' and 'changing behaviours' when it comes to the cosmetic industry (*The Impact Field Guide*, n.d., slides 70-71). This means that the campaign would intend to create a change in public attitudes and actively mobilise individuals to do something differently. We decided it would be beneficial to focus on both the effects of toxic products on humans as well as the environment since it is often easier to get people to care about protecting themselves than the environment.

When researching this issue and creating the campaign, it was beneficial to have an academically diverse team (two people in health, two in communications, one in history, and one in technology development) since there are so many different aspects to this particular media campaign that need people with different areas of expertise. For instance, the Health and Nursing students were helpful in educating the rest of the team about the composition of each chemical. As a Digital Media student, I was able to aid in designing and creating the media components.

Considering the aforementioned information, the campaign would inform the main consumers of these products – typically individuals between the ages of 15 and 50 – of the harms they cause and, at the same time, promote clean beauty/hygiene products since this group is most likely to be affected by toxic cosmetic products. The “Promote, Embrace and Educate You” or P.R.E.T.T.Y campaign aims to do this by creating social media pages (specifically, Instagram) and publishing a free app since these channels are most suitable to capture the attention of the individuals in the target audience.

The app and the social media pages go hand-in-hand. The social media pages serve a dual purpose. Firstly, we would generate content which would include short lessons and, from time to time, spotlight clean and ethical brands in the form of short videos or Instagram Reels. Furthermore, the social media pages would be used to create awareness about the app and promote its several useful features which include news stories, informative lessons about

different common chemicals in cosmetic products, and a section with cleaner alternative options (that has a built-in scanner so people could take a picture of a product in store to find out how clean it is before purchasing it). The campaign would sometimes partner up with clean beauty influencers to create the above-mentioned content since their principles – like advocating for sustainable and ethical beauty products – and audience align with the campaign's.

At the beginning of this course, I had very little knowledge of the concept of slow violence. Through “show and tell” presentations and the excerpt from Robert Nixon's book (2011), I had the opportunity to further understand that there are many environmental (and consequently health) issues that are not instant but occur over a period of several years. The discussion of toxic beauty was briefly mentioned during these discussions but I was still curious. I was delighted to be able to create a campaign for the same because it encouraged me to dive deeper into the types of chemicals that are present in my daily products and how they are harming myself as well as the planet. With my research, I was able to change my own mind and behaviours. The final project presented the opportunity to develop my media creation skills since I got to design our app from scratch and was able to utilise strategies I learned throughout the course like how to ethically create technological media campaigns with minimal digital waste. Overall, through this course, I have been able to learn about a wide variety of detrimental environmental issues that I hadn't known of before as well as different media/campaign strategies that can be implemented to remediate them.

### References

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