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Brands wanted to make SPF more fun. But do they still work?

Today, SPFs come in shimmery gel sticks and whipped mousses as brands seek to make the category more sexy and less medicinal. But product efficacy matters most.

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Suncare brand Vacation has expanded in the market with a range of SPF formats including whips, oils and gélées. Photo: Courtesy of Vacation

SPF, in recent years, has gotten a facelift. No longer sold only in sticky creams or mineral formulas that leave a white cast, SPF now comes in featherlight gels, shimmering oils, fragrance-infused mists and skincare-serum hybrids. The change reflects a fundamental shift in consumer expectations, product design and development. But regardless of format or packaging, what matters most about SPF is that it works — so do they?

With new formula types, brands are rushing in to reshape the category. This year, Vacation launched an SPF mousse; Dear Cloud introduced a body glaze; Clear Start by Dermalogica brought out an SPF shimmer stick; Skylar hit the market with a perfume-SPF mist; Tan Luxe's debut into SPF featured a water-based gel

and mist; and Emma Lewisham released a glow-tinted SPF serum. Spoooge and Kopari's glittering SPF shimmer offerings followed suit, while this month, Ultra Violette and One/Size launched makeup-compatible SPF mists. They all join early adopters like Supergoop!, Coola, and K-beauty brands such as Tocobo and Numbuzin, who laid the groundwork for SPF's textural makeover.



Vacation's latest SPF launch, the Classic Whip SPF30. Photo: Courtesy of Vacation

“Sensoriality is a big driver for the new product development in the suncare category right now, as consumer demand for textural sophistication is on the rise,” says Lisa Payne, head of beauty at trends intelligence firm Stylus. “Sunscreens on retail shelves are emulating serums, invisible gels and lightweight hydrating moisturisers.”

In the US, new-generation SPF formats are outpacing traditional lotions and creams in both dollar share and growth. According to Circana, SPF serums now account for 2 per cent (\$5.7 million) of the market and grew 91 per cent compared with the year prior. SPF bars, solids and sticks have similarly gained momentum, capturing 5 per cent of the category's dollar share (\$4 million) and growing 19 per cent year-on-year. By contrast, creams and lotions (\$8.3 million), while still dominant, grew by a slightly smaller 14 per cent during the same period. Meanwhile, in Asia, consumer intelligence agency Nielsen IQ reports an increasing demand for SPF powders over creams due to their ability to adapt well to local climate needs.

Experts argue this makeover was long overdue. “For a while, SPF was underserving a large part of the population. They often had a white cast and were heavy

— that’s all consumers got,” says Bia Bezamat, associate director and cultural insights specialist at market research firm Kantar. Michael Nolte, creative director of business insights platform Beautystreams, agrees. “The textural evolution is significant in overcoming the long-standing barriers within the category, including stickiness, heaviness and white casts,” he says.



This week, beauty brands Ultra Violette and One/Size introduced SPF mists for application over makeup. Photo: Courtesy of Ultra Violette and One/Size

Now, brands are reimagining SPF not just as a necessity or a pure medicinal play, but as a product consumers actually want to wear that is fun, lightweight and texturally engaging. The goal? To turn a functional product into an enjoyable ritual. According to Bezamat, this shift has been largely driven by a younger demographic — primarily Gen Z, Gen Alpha, and millennials — who have demanded more, fuelling a shift in both expectations and product adoption. For this consumer cohort, efficacy is the baseline, and SPF must also deliver on playful textures, aesthetics and sensory appeal.

But the push to make SPF increasingly wearable and appealing introduces fresh challenges. While brands are eager to innovate, they can’t afford to sacrifice on the core necessity of the category: reliable sun protection. Today’s SPF offerings must walk a fine line by delivering broad-spectrum efficacy with a superior skin feel, zero white cast and full compliance with global regulations — all while meeting the expectations of an increasingly savvy consumer base.

The balancing act

Today's SPF portfolio is expected to be everything at once: effective, cosmetically elegant, inclusive and easy to use, and the brands that fail to meet even one of these expectations often face swift public scrutiny.

Case in point: Tower 28's launch of its lightweight SOS Faceguard SPF 30. Marketed as having "no white cast" and a "universal tint", the product quickly came under fire on social media, where darker-skinned users documented visible residue. Founder Amy Liu responded publicly, acknowledging the brand "missed the mark" and committing to a reformulation. The marketing language was adjusted, and claims around universality were removed. (The brand didn't respond to additional requests for comment.) The mishap crystallised the mounting pressure on brands launching the market with an SPF offering.

"In a climate where brands are held publicly accountable, there's no room to compromise on performance, efficacy and appeal," says Shakaila Forbes-Bell, fashion psychologist at financial platform Clearpay. "SPF needs to have it all, or risk losing consumer trust".



Hannah Amor, business leader at Dermalogica's Clear Start, says there is a need for an SPF that's not only safe for acne-prone skin but also exciting to use as Gen Z consumers crave multi-tasking hybrids and sensorial products. Photo: Courtesy of Clear Start

Complicating matters further are the regulatory hurdles that vary dramatically by region. “Innovating SPF products across the US, Europe and Asia-Pacific presents distinct regulatory challenges,” explains Robyn Wilson, cosmetic regulatory expert at The Cosmetic Regulator. In the US, SPFs are treated as over-the-counter drugs, which limits the palette of approved UV filters and requires substantial safety and efficacy data for any new ingredients. By contrast, Europe and Asia-Pacific treat SPFs as cosmetic products, enabling faster innovation, broader ingredients lists and greater texture experimentation.

Testing standards also add further complexity. The US mandates FDA compliance and a minimum SPF of 15, while the EU operates under ISO protocols, requiring a minimum SPF of 6. “Asia-Pacific markets often impose additional local testing protocols (including controlled testing on human volunteers with different skin types, exposing volunteers to UV in a controlled setting and testing the skin for any irritation) further adding to the complexity,” Wilson says. This variability doesn’t just affect speed to market, says Wilson, it directly shapes how brands approached texture innovation.

Standardised SPF testing requires precise, uniform application at fixed quantities, which were limiting for emerging formats like powders, sticks and mists that are designed to be lightweight, layered, or applied intuitively. “If your innovation relies on ultra-sheer or buildable applications, you may have struggled to pass SPF validation under certain regions,” Wilson explains. A gel mist may feel nice, but if it doesn’t deliver the required protection in controlled conditions, it risks failing compliance, regardless of how well consumers actually use it.



Tan Luxe's Sci-tech Hydra-Gel SPF doesn't use alcohol in its gel formula, adding to the complexity during the formulation process. Photo: Courtesy of Tan Luxe

The gap between pleasure and performance is narrowing. “Historically, yes, there was a trade-off, but that’s changing,” says Kailey Bradt, a product developer and startup advisor. “Raw materials companies [vendors that work on improving the stability and quality of dispersions and functional ingredients in SPF formulations to then make it easier for formulators and product developers to play with formats] have invested heavily in new ingredient systems to improve both look and feel.”

She adds that vendors like Applechem have developed dispersions that have a higher threshold of loading non-nano zinc oxide (a reef friendly mineral UV filter traditionally limited by its chalky texture) into SPF formulations. Bradt says these dispersions improve the spreadability, stability and skin-feel of non-nano zinc, supporting formulators to deliver new formats of high-performance mineral SPFs, without compromising on appeal. Payne agrees: “Every year, we’re seeing filter and cosmetic manufacturers come up with new options like natural SPF boosters that allow brands to use less of the white cast-causing ingredients, leading to a better sensory experience.” Encapsulated UV filters, pigment-tinted formats and novel dispersion technologies are helping brands design products that not only pass regulatory hurdles, but also deliver the invisible, weightless finishes consumers now expect.

Mineral SPF, which rely on zinc oxide or titanium dioxide, present even tougher challenges. “Natural and mineral UV filters are notoriously difficult,” says Emma Lewisham, CEO and co-founder of her eponymous skincare brand. “It took us eight years of research and development to formulate our SPF 50 range and glow serum. We developed a proprietary dispersion technology that creates an invisible, weightless, illuminating finish, without compromising on protection or safety.” The brand also sought out certification from the FDA and Australia’s Therapeutic Goods Administration (TGA, a ruling regarded as the gold standard for SPF testing) ahead of formulating to ensure the product met regulatory standards while maintaining its textural edge.

Experts say no matter the format, brands must be crystal clear about application guidelines, says Dr Asmi Berry, a board-certified dermatologist based in Los Angeles. She adds that content marketing should reinforce these instructions, helping consumers understand how to use newer SPF formats effectively to ensure adequate protection. “Education will be more important now than ever,” Berry says.



Co-founder and CEO Emma Lewisham spent eight years developing their SPF50 range and Glow serum to ensure there was no compromise on performance and appeal. Photo: Courtesy of Emma Lewisham

Joanna Czech, celebrity aesthetician and skincare expert, urges brands not to lose sight of sun safety in the pursuit of texture. “A brand should never market how a sunscreen feels over how well it protects,” she warns. Czech also emphasises the need for transparency around how different formats perform in real-world conditions. “For example, I wouldn’t recommend that brands promote powder sunscreens for use in hot weather. When mixed with sweat, they can irritate skin. Brands

need to be clear with consumers, especially if they're innovating with unconventional delivery systems.”

What if a brand is yet to crack the perfect texture? There are other ways to compete. “If the texture isn't revolutionary, focus on the ritual, packaging, or emotional connection,” says Bezamat. “Borrow from luxury skincare and cosmetics. Can your SPF feel like a desirable step in someone's daily routine?” She points to elegant packaging or refillable formats as ways to build emotional value.

Fragrance is another emotional lever, says Dakota Green, founding partner of suncare brand Vacation. Despite the brand bringing SPF whips, oils and gélées to the market, she says fragrance has been key to standing out. “Each SPF formula is designed to feel indulgent on application, with fragrances crafted by perfumers to evoke what we call a ‘vacation state of mind’.

Application then becomes part of the pleasure and a sensorial ritual that adds to your state of relaxation and joy, not something that interrupts it,” Green explains.

As SPFs evolve from medicinal to covetable, success in the market will hinge not just on breakthrough textures, but on how well brands educate, test and communicate alongside their playful offering. While SPF may have had a facelift, moving forward, performance, transparency and pleasure must co-exist. Anything less will struggle to stand up to an evolving market.

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