International Journal of Pharmaceutical Drug Design (IJPDD)
Website: https://ijpdd.org/
ISSN: 2584-2897
Vol. 2, Issue 5, May, 2025
Page No.: 38-43

Review

Regulatory Challenges in Cosmeceuticals: The need for Comprehensive Harmonized Guidelines

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DOI: *10.62896/ijpdd.2.5.04*

Conflict of interest: *NIL*

Abstract:
Cosmeceuticals, which is considered at the intersection of cosmetics and pharmaceuticals, have experienced significant growth worldwide in recent years. These products are formulated with biologically active ingredients that offer both aesthetic and therapeutic benefits, including anti-aging properties, pigmentation control, acne treatment, and skin rejuvenation. However, despite their increasing popularity, regulatory oversight of cosmeceuticals remains inconsistent and unclear in various regions. Unlike pharmaceuticals, cosmeceuticals are often marketed without rigorous clinical trials or regulatory assessments, even when they make functional or therapeutic claims. This regulatory ambiguity presents challenges in terms of consumer safety, product effectiveness, quality control, and accurate labeling.

In many countries, cosmeceuticals are still regulated as general cosmetics, resulting in minimal scrutiny of the bioactive ingredients they contain. This has led to potential health risks, misleading advertising, product contamination, and a lack of standardized testing procedures. As a result, the credibility of the cosmeceutical industry is at stake, particularly in the absence of a unified global regulatory framework. This review aims to examine the current regulatory approaches in major markets such as the United States, European Union, India, Japan, China, and Canada, while exploring the discrepancies between these regions.

Furthermore, the article emphasizes the need for stricter quality control measures, the importance of scientifically supported claims, and the incorporation of ethical considerations and new research into future regulations. Establishing an internationally accepted regulatory framework will enhance transparency, safeguard consumers, and encourage innovation in the cosmeceutical industry, ultimately benefiting both public health and the industry's reputation.

Keywords: Cosmeceuticals, Regulatory Framework, Cosmetic Safety, Pharmaceutical Regulations, Quality Control, Consumer Protection, Global Standardization, Product Efficacy, Dermatological Safety, Market Regulation

Article History
Received: 12/04/2025
Accepted: 26/04/2025
Published: 04/05/2025

Introduction

Cosmeceuticals, a term coined from "cosmetics" and "pharmaceuticals," refer to products that provide cosmetic benefits along with biologically active ingredients that influence skin function. These products are increasingly popular due to their claimed ability to improve skin health, combat aging, and address dermatological conditions [1].

The global cosmeceutical market has witnessed exponential growth, driven by advancements in biotechnology, increased consumer awareness, and demand for multifunctional skincare solutions [2].

Despite their therapeutic claims, cosmeceuticals are not subjected to the rigorous approval processes required for pharmaceuticals. The absence of well-defined regulations creates ambiguity in their

classification, leading to discrepancies in quality assurance, labeling, and consumer safety [3]. In many countries, cosmeceuticals are classified under cosmetics laws, limiting oversight on their pharmacological effects [9]. This has resulted in unregulated claims, product adulteration, and varying safety standards, which can lead to adverse reactions among consumers [6].

With the increasing demand for such products, it is imperative to establish comprehensive guidelines that ensure the safety, efficacy, and standardization of cosmeceuticals. The objective of this review is to analyze the existing regulatory landscape, identify key challenges, and propose a harmonized regulatory model that balances scientific innovation with consumer protection.

Classification of Cosmeceuticals

Cosmeceuticals are broadly categorized based on their target applications:

A. Skin Care Cosmeceuticals

Anti-aging formulations: Retinoids, peptides, collagen boosters.

Skin brightening agents: Vitamin C, niacinamide, arbutin, kojic acid.

Acne treatment: Salicylic acid, benzoyl peroxide, tea tree oil.

Moisturizers with active hydration: Hyaluronic acid, ceramides.

B. Hair Care Cosmeceuticals

Hair growth stimulators: Minoxidil, caffeine-based treatments.

Anti-dandruff formulations: Zinc pyrithione, ketoconazole.

Hair strengthening serums: Biotin, keratin, amino acids.

C. Oral and Dental Cosmeceuticals

Whitening toothpaste: Hydrogen peroxide, fluoride-based treatments.

Gum health enhancers: Chlorhexidine, probiotics for oral microbiome balance.

Research Methodology

This review was conducted using a qualitative research approach, analyzing secondary data sources such as published regulatory documents, peer-reviewed journal articles, and international guidelines on cosmeceuticals. Data collection focused on:

Existing regulatory frameworks in key regions including the EU, the US, Japan, China, and India.

Case studies of regulatory success and failures to highlight potential risks and best practices.

Scientific literature on cosmeceutical safety, efficacy, and consumer impact.

Industry reports and market analysis to understand the economic impact of regulations. A comparative analysis of international regulatory models was conducted to identify gaps and propose a globally harmonized framework. The findings were synthesized to provide recommendations for improving cosmeceutical guidelines and ensuring consumer protection.

Current Regulatory Landscape

Different countries follow distinct regulatory approaches to cosmeceuticals:

Challenges in the Absence of Regulatory Guidelines:

Unclear Classification: The absence of a clear legal definition leads to confusion about product claims and regulatory adherence.

Concerns Over Safety and Effectiveness: Variations in quality control can result in potential risks to consumers.

Lack of Consistent Testing: The absence of standardized testing criteria affects the reliability of products.

Deceptive Claims and Advertising: Some companies may overstate benefits, creating misleading impressions without scientific evidence.

Inconsistent Regulations: Differences in regulations across countries create barriers to international trade and hinder the standardization of products.

Restrictions on Ingredients: Varying ingredient bans and limitations across countries pose challenges for manufacturers in developing products that meet global standards.

Case Studies and Real-World Examples

Hydroquinone Bans in the European Union Summary: Hydroquinone, a skin-lightening ingredient, is prohibited in cosmetic products in the EU due to safety issues such as its potential to cause cancer and ochronosis. It is classified as a banned substance under entry 1339 of Annex II to Regulation (EC) No 1223/2009. Reference: European Commission. (2021). Commission Regulation (EU) 2021/1099. Official Journal of the European Union. Retrieved from

Johnson & Johnson’s Neutrogena and Aveeno Sunscreen Recall (2021, USA) Summary: In July 2021, Johnson & Johnson voluntarily recalled certain Neutrogena and Aveeno aerosol sunscreens after internal testing found trace amounts of benzene, a carcinogen. Consumers were urged to discontinue use of the affected products. Reference:

U.S. Food & Drug Administration. (2021). Johnson & Johnson Consumer Inc. Issues Voluntary Recall of Specific NEUTROGENA® and AVEENO® Aerosol Sunscreen Products Due to the Presence of Benzene. Retrieved from

FDA Warnings on Stem Cell-Based Anti-Aging Creams Summary: The FDA has issued warnings to companies selling stem cell-based products, such as anti-aging creams, without proper approval. These products have been linked to serious side effects, including infections and tumor development due to unsafe manufacturing processes. Reference: U.S. Food & Drug Administration. (2019). Important Patient and Consumer Information About Regenerative Medicine Therapies. Retrieved from

Mercury in Skin Lightening Products in Africa and Asia Summary: Mercury-laced skin lightening products, banned in many countries, still pose significant health risks in certain regions, including kidney damage and neurological issues. The World Health Organization is working to eliminate these dangerous products. Reference: World Health Organization. (2019). Mercury in Skin Lightening Products. Retrieved from

Regulation of Placenta-Based Creams in Australia Summary: In Australia, placenta-based creams, marketed for skin rejuvenation, are regulated under the Australian Register of Therapeutic Goods (ARTG), which ensures they meet safety and efficacy standards. Reference: Therapeutic Goods Administration. (2023). Sheep Placenta Glutathione Skin Beauty (ARTG ID 455770). Retrieved from

Japan's Quasi-Drug Category for Cosmeceuticals Summary: Japan has a regulatory category called "quasi-drugs" for products that are not fully pharmaceutical but have more significant effects than ordinary cosmetics. This category covers products like anti-dandruff shampoos and skin whitening agents, ensuring safety and efficacy through a rigorous approval process. Reference: ChemLinked. (2020). Japan Quasi-Drug Regulation. Retrieved from

FDA Warning Letters to CBD Skincare Brands (2020–2021, USA) Summary: The FDA issued warnings to companies selling CBD-infused skincare products that made unapproved claims about treating or curing diseases. These unverified claims pose public health risks. Reference: U.S. Food & Drug Administration. (2020). FDA Warns Companies Illegally Selling CBD Products. Retrieved from

Loopholes in the Current Regulatory Framework

Lack of Clear Classification: Cosmeceuticals exist in a grey area between cosmetics and pharmaceuticals, leading to regulatory confusion. Various countries have different definitions, making compliance across borders difficult and inconsistent safety enforcement.

Absence of Standardized Testing and Approval: Unlike pharmaceuticals, cosmeceuticals often skip clinical trials. In many countries, there are no mandatory safety assessments like toxicological or dermatological testing, which increases the risk of ineffective or dangerous products entering the market.

Misleading Claims and Marketing : Many cosmeceutical brands promote unverified therapeutic benefits. Without proper regulation, companies can make exaggerated claims, raising consumer expectations and increasing safety risks.

Inconsistent Labeling Requirements : Ingredient lists and active ingredient concentrations are often not disclosed. Some products mislabel or hide pharmaceutical ingredients, leading to health risks. Standardized labeling regulations are needed for transparency.

Regulatory Variations Across Countries: In the U.S., the FDA classifies cosmeceuticals as cosmetics, while the EU has stricter regulations. Other regions, including Asia and India, often have looser guidelines, complicating global trade and standardization.

Adulteration and Contamination Risks : Many cosmeceuticals contain undisclosed steroids, heavy metals, or allergens. Poor quality control in certain regions results in unsafe or counterfeit products that can harm consumers.

Lack of Post-Market Surveillance: Once cosmeceuticals are released, they are rarely monitored for adverse effects. Consumer complaints and side effects often go unreported, allowing unsafe products to remain on the market.

No Global Standardization: Different markets have contradictory regulations, which makes international sales difficult. There is no universal guideline for ensuring product consistency globally, highlighting the need for a harmonized regulatory framework.

Future Trends in Global Cosmetic Regulation

Stricter Ingredient Regulations and Safety Assessments:

Regulatory authorities are increasingly restricting harmful chemicals and requiring more safety data on cosmetic ingredients.

Harmonization of Global Cosmetic Regulations:
Efforts are underway to standardize regulations to ease global trade and compliance. Bodies like the International Cooperation on Cosmetics Regulation (ICCR) and ISO are working to align regulations across countries.

Ban on Animal Testing and Adoption of Alternative Testing Methods:
Many countries are banning animal testing and encouraging alternative methods, such as in vitro testing and computer modeling, for safety assessments.

Rising Demand for Clean Beauty and Sustainable Products:
Consumers are increasingly seeking “clean” and “green” cosmetics, prompting regulators to restrict harmful ingredients and improve sustainability practices. Regulations on microplastics, PFAS (forever chemicals), and toxic preservatives are becoming more stringent.

Regulation of Nanotechnology and Biotechnology in Cosmetics:
New formulations are incorporating nanomaterials (e.g., nano titanium dioxide in sunscreens) and biotech-derived ingredients (e.g., lab-grown collagen).

Future regulations will focus on:
Nano-safety assessment protocols (the EU already requires pre-market approval for nanomaterials).
Biotech skincare regulations, as lab-engineered ingredients blur the line between cosmetics and drugs.

Transparency in Labeling and Marketing Claims:
Governments are tightening regulations on misleading claims (e.g., “organic,” “hypoallergenic,” “clinically proven”) to safeguard consumer interests.

Growth of AI and Digital Compliance Systems:
Regulatory agencies are digitizing compliance systems for faster product registration and monitoring, improving efficiency and transparency [4].

Digitalization and AI-Powered Skin Analysis: AI-powered skin scanners allow consumers to select cosmeceuticals based on real-time skin analysis. Devices like L'Oréal Perso and Neutrogena Skin360 enable customized home formulations [5]

Herbal Extracts and CBD in Skincare: Cannabidiol (CBD) is gaining popularity for its anti-inflammatory, anti-acne, and soothing effects. Botanical ingredients like Centella Asiatica, Green Tea, Aloe Vera, and Licorice Root offer antioxidant and healing benefits [2].

Personalized Skincare: Advances in AI and data science have enabled the creation of tailored skincare based on DNA, skin type, and environmental exposure. Brands such as Clinique iD and SkinCeuticals Custom D.O.S.E. are leading this trend [6].

Proposed Harmonized Guidelines for Global Cosmeceutical Regulation

Definition and Classification: A universal definition is necessary to ensure consistent regulation. A two-tier system—Type I (low-potency) and Type II (high-potency)—can aid clarity without regulating cosmeceuticals as drugs [3].
Safety and Toxicological Evaluation: Mandatory safety assessments including dermal irritation, sensitization, mutagenicity, and nanotoxicity for products using nanoscale delivery systems should be enforced [7].
Efficacy and Claims Substantiation: Functional claims like anti-aging or acne reduction should be supported by in vitro studies, animal models, or clinical trials. The level of evidence should correlate with claim strength [9].
Labeling and Marketing Standards: Labels must list active ingredients, concentrations, and warnings, avoiding exaggerated claims unless clinically substantiated. Uniform labeling increases consumer trust [4].
Manufacturing and Quality Assurance: Global GMP standards should apply. This includes microbial testing, batch traceability, and safety screening of herbal ingredients for contaminants [8].
Ingredient Approval and Pre-Market Review: A global database of approved, restricted, and banned ingredients should be created. Companies must submit dossiers detailing formulation, safety, and efficacy before market entry [10].

Post-Market Surveillance: Active surveillance systems should monitor adverse effects. Global collaboration for safety alerts and recalls is essential [3].

Nanotechnology-Specific Regulations: Nano-ingredients must undergo toxicity assessments and be clearly labeled. Specific thresholds for nanoscale materials should be defined [7].

Environmental and Ethical Considerations: Regulations must encourage sustainable, cruelty-free, and biodegradable formulations. Microplastics should be banned, and recyclable packaging promoted [6].

International Collaboration and Governance: An international regulatory body akin to ICH can oversee harmonization, mutual recognition of inspections, and global standard setting [4].

Conclusion

The rapid growth of the cosmeceutical industry, which blends the benefits of cosmetics and pharmaceuticals, highlights the critical need for a harmonized global regulatory framework. Without clear and consistent guidelines, consumers are at risk of exposure to unsafe products, misleading claims, and poorly tested ingredients. This regulatory gap leads to challenges in ensuring product safety, quality, and efficacy. Establishing comprehensive, evidence-based regulations will not only protect consumers but will also provide manufacturers with clear standards, helping them navigate complex market dynamics.

As the industry evolves, innovations such as AI-driven formulations, personalized skincare, and biotechnology-based ingredients are expected to redefine the future of beauty and wellness. However, without stringent regulatory oversight, these advancements could pose unforeseen risks. Thus, regulators must prioritize the safety of active ingredients, the substantiation of therapeutic claims, and the transparency of labeling to prevent potential harm to consumers.

International collaboration among regulatory bodies is essential to streamline processes, reduce regulatory fragmentation, and facilitate global trade in cosmeceuticals. This would ensure that products meet the same safety and efficacy standards, regardless of where they are marketed, and promote mutual recognition of compliance across borders.

Furthermore, as sustainability and ethical considerations become increasingly important to consumers, future regulations must address environmental concerns such as biodegradable packaging, cruelty-free testing, and sustainable sourcing of ingredients. Regulations should also focus on reducing the use of harmful chemicals, such as microplastics and endocrine-disrupting substances, to meet the growing demand for "clean" beauty.

The regulatory landscape will need to adapt to emerging technologies, such as nanotechnology and biotechnology, ensuring that these innovations are safe for consumers and the environment. A global approach to cosmeceutical regulation will create a safer, more reliable market, where consumers can trust that the products they use are not only effective but also ethically produced and scientifically validated.

As the industry continues to bridge the gap between skincare and medicine, it is crucial that regulatory authorities take proactive steps to create a framework that fosters innovation while ensuring consumer protection. A harmonized regulatory environment will help position cosmeceuticals as a trusted category, driving growth and innovation in the beauty and wellness sector, benefiting consumers, manufacturers, and regulatory agencies alike. In the future, stricter regulations, global standardization, and a focus on consumer well-being will shape a safer and more sustainable cosmeceutical industry, which will likely become a cornerstone of the personal care market.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

The authors would like to thank their mentors and colleagues for their valuable guidance.

FUNDING

No specific funding was received for this study.

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