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Beyond Traditional Endorsement: Meaning Transfer as a Foundation for Building Celebrity Owned Brands

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Abstract

The evolution of celebrity involvement in branding has shifted from traditional endorsements to full brand ownership. This paper examines how celebrity entrepreneurs leverage meaning transfer strategy to build successful brands. While traditional celebrity endorsements rely on models such as source attractiveness, match-up hypothesis, and source credibility, meaning transfer strategy offers a more comprehensive framework for understanding celebrity-owned ventures. This study analyses a case study of a celebrity-owned brand: Rare Beauty by Selena Gomez. The examination is conducted through a qualitative analysis of how celebrities transfer their personal meanings, values and cultural capital directly into brand identity, creating authentic connections with consumers.

Key words: celebrity branding, celebrity-owned brands, celebrity entrepreneurship, brand authenticity, brand identity, meaning transfer.

Introduction

Understanding why certain celebrity-brand relationships generate deep and lasting consumer resonance has gained a lot importance in contemporary marketing. Existing frameworks centred on attractiveness, credibility, or product fit, offer partial explanations at best, as they treat celebrity influence as a function of isolated attributes rather than as part of a broader cultural process. This paper argues that meaning transfer theory, developed by McCracken (1989), provides a more comprehensive account, one that traces how symbolic meanings accumulated in a celebrity's public persona migrate into products and ultimately into the self-concepts of consumers¹. To examine this process in a contemporary context, the paper draws on Rare Beauty, founded by Selena Gomez in 2020, as a case study in which meaning transfer operates with unusual depth and consistency — built on Gomez's long-established public values of self-acceptance, authenticity, and mental health advocacy. The analysis moves from a theoretical grounding in brand identity and celebrity culture, through an examination of the meaning transfer model, to a practical illustration of how each of its stages is enacted within a single, commercially successful brand.

¹ G. McCracken, (1989). Who is the celebrity endorser? Cultural foundations of the endorsement process. *Journal of Consumer Research*, 16(3).

1. Theoretical Background

1.1. Role of Communicating Brand Identity

Reduced to its most elementary form, a brand might appear to be nothing more than a name or a graphic device that identifies a product. However, by engaging with brands, individuals communicate proximity to certain social groups or distance from others, articulating values and aspirations in a language that is instantly readable within a given cultural context. Crucially, this symbolic logic applies not only to commercial goods and organisations but equally to people, including public figures, whose public personas function as brands in their own².

The outward manifestation of this symbolic architecture is what scholars and practitioners refer to as brand identity. Rather than denoting a mere visual system, brand identity encompasses the full range of tangible and perceptual elements through which a brand achieves recognition and communicates its distinctive position. Logos, typography, and colour palettes are only the most visible layer of a much richer structure that integrates communication tone, product design, retail experience, and digital presence into a coherent whole. Each of these touchpoints contributes to a unified signal that encodes the brand's core promises and values. Equally important is the internal dimension of brand identity, the organisational culture and guiding principles that underpin what a brand claims to stand for. When these internal and external dimensions are aligned and executed with consistency, the result is heightened recognition, sharper differentiation, and a strengthened perception of value among consumers³.

Communicating this identity is not a secondary concern but a constitutive one. It is through deliberate and sustained communication that a brand's values, personality, and market positioning are made legible to audiences. Brand communication is oriented toward building genuine engagement. It invites dialogue, stimulates emotional responses, and creates the conditions for meaningful interaction between a brand and its publics. Achieving this requires understanding of where and how different audiences prefer to engage, so that messages can be crafted to feel relevant rather than intrusive. When brand communication succeeds simultaneously on cognitive, relational, and motivational levels, it accomplishes something

² W. Bastos, & S. J. Levy, (2012). A history of the concept of branding: Practice and theory. *Journal of Historical Research in Marketing*, 4(3), 347–368.

³ A. Wheeler, (2013). *Designing brand identity: An essential guide for the whole branding team*. John Wiley & Sons.

beyond mere visibility: it generates emotional commitment and lays the groundwork for enduring relationships with consumers that extend well past the initial point of purchase⁴.

Yet brand identity, however well designed, does not in itself produce the emotional depth that contemporary consumers increasingly seek. That dimension emerges when a brand transcends its structural components and becomes a repository of meanings and lived experiences to which people relate on a personal level. In this expanded understanding, brands are not simply vehicles for delivering products; they are resources through which individuals articulate beliefs, signal allegiances, and curate aspects of their self-image. Within this dynamic, authenticity assumes particular strategic importance. A brand perceived as authentic is one that demonstrates coherence between its stated values and its observable behaviour, one that builds credibility not through assertion alone but through a sustained pattern of actions that honour its founding promise. Trust, in this context, is not granted immediately but accumulates through repeated encounters in which expectation and experience converge. This is especially consequential in identity-sensitive categories, where consumers are not merely purchasing products but participating in an ongoing act of self-definition. Brands that succeed in designing emotionally resonant touchpoints within these categories are often rewarded with communities of deeply committed consumers whose loyalty extends well beyond habitual purchase⁵.

1.2. Mechanisms of celebrity influence on consumer behaviour

The celebrity, as a cultural figure was deeply embedded in the broader evolution of social and technological structures. Its modern form is inseparable from the expansion of mass media that began in the late nineteenth century and accelerated dramatically through the twentieth. Newspapers, radio, and eventually television created the conditions under which selected individuals could be made visible to vast, geographically dispersed audiences on a sustained basis. As these platforms matured, the logic of celebrity underwent a telling shift: recognition came to be grounded less in verifiable achievement and more in the simple fact of mediated visibility. Being seen, consistently, across multiple channels became constitutive of celebrity status, establishing fame as a communicative resource with significant social and commercial potential⁶. As media landscapes have continued to evolve, the cultural position of celebrities has expanded correspondingly. Contemporary public figures no longer occupy only the entertainment sphere; they have become active participants in shaping social norms and

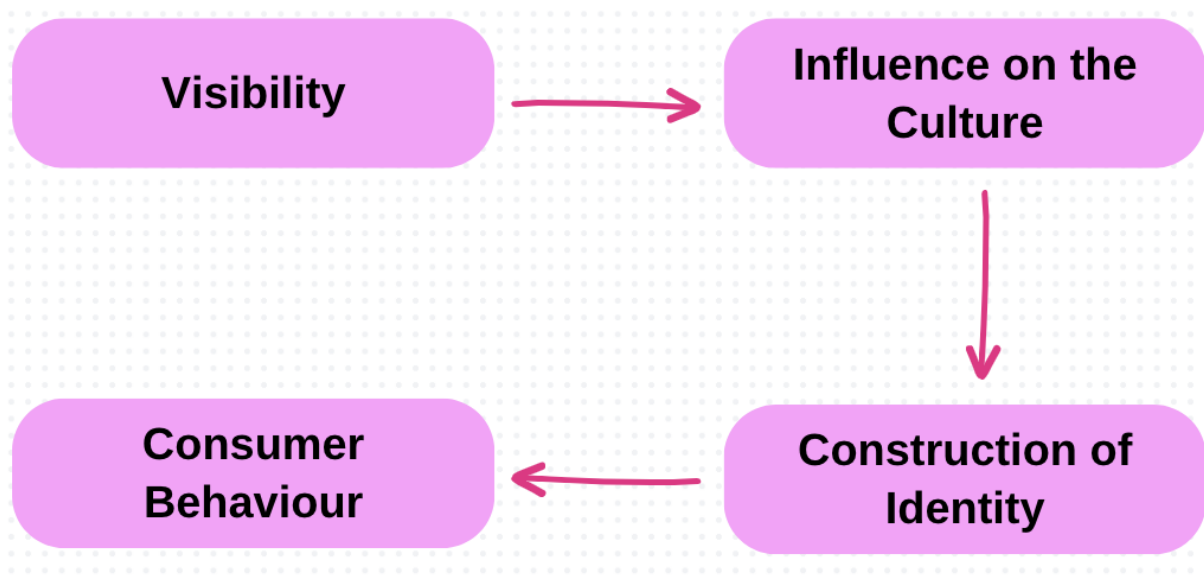
⁴ C. Fill, & S. Turnbull, (2019). *Marketing communications*. Pearson Education Limited.

⁵ K. Budelmann, & K. Yang, (2019). *Brand identity essentials: 100 principles for designing logos and building brands*. Quarto Publishing Group USA.

⁶ A. D. Wesołowski, (2020). Beyond celebrity history: Towards the consolidation of fame studies. *Celebrity Studies*, 11(2), 189.

collective values. Their near-constant presence across digital and traditional platforms cultivates a sense of proximity and accessibility, positioning them as credible guidelines for audiences navigating questions of identity, lifestyle, and self-improvement. This sustained visibility does not merely reflect cultural values it actively shapes how those values are interpreted and assigned priority. As illustrated in Image 1., the influence of celebrity on consumer behaviour unfolds through a chain of interconnected processes: visibility generates cultural influence, which in turn informs identity construction, which ultimately shapes purchasing decisions. Celebrities, in this framework, operate not as mirrors of consumer aspirations but as active agents in their formation.⁷

Image 1. The Process of Celebrity Influence on Consumer Behaviour



Source: own elaboration based on McCracken, G. (1989). Who is the celebrity endorser? Cultural foundations of the endorsement process. *Journal of Consumer Research*, 16(3), 314–318.

This capacity for influence acquires particular depth when celebrities align their public presence with purposeful narratives whether centred on social advocacy, personal empowerment, or educational engagement. In such cases, their reach translates not merely into attention but into meaningful engagement that can reshape attitudes and motivate behaviour. The key variable here is authenticity. Audiences are perceptive and tend to distinguish between genuine commitment and strategic positioning. When a celebrity is perceived as authentic, that is, when their public actions are seen as consistent with their stated values, emotional attachment follows. That attachment, once established, can extend beyond the individual to

⁷ Douglas, S. J., & McDonnell, A. (2019). *Celebrity: A history of fame*. NYU Press.

encompass the brands, causes, and products with which the celebrity is associated. Fame, in this light, functions as a conduit between personal visibility and market influence, with authenticity serving as the mechanism that either activates or undermines this conduit. When celebrities operate from a coherent value system, their presence becomes a durable force capable of shaping not only cultural perceptions but consumer behaviour over extended periods of time⁸.

1.3. Meaning Transfer Theory

Scholarly efforts to explain why celebrity endorsements succeed or fail have produced several influential frameworks. The most widely cited among these are:

- the source credibility model,
- the source attractiveness model,
- the match-up hypothesis.

Each of these models contributes a distinct analytic lens. The source credibility model foregrounds the perceived expertise and trustworthiness of the endorser. The source attractiveness model emphasises physical appeal and social desirability. The match-up hypothesis focuses on the degree of congruence between the celebrity's image and the endorsed product. Taken individually, however, these frameworks share a common limitation: they concentrate on specific, isolated attributes of the celebrity rather than addressing the broader cultural mechanism through which endorsement actually operates. It is precisely this gap that meaning transfer theory is designed to fill⁹.

Meaning transfer theory reframes celebrity endorsement as a form of cultural circulation, a process by which symbolic meanings flow through society and attach themselves to objects, persons, and ultimately consumers. According to this model, the starting point is the culturally constituted world: the shared categories, values, and social distinctions that organise collective life. Celebrities, through their mediated presence, the roles they play, the narratives associated with them, the events they attend and the causes they represent gradually become associated with configurations of meaning. These associations accumulate over time into a recognisable and coherent public persona that audiences learn to interpret and anticipate.

The full process unfolds across three interconnected stages.

⁸ A. H. Ahmed, & A. M. Faiq, (2022). An investigation into different perspectives on the concept of celebrity and celebritized. *Journal of Language Studies*, 5(4), 143.

⁹ M. Moraes, J. Gountans, & others. (2019). Celebrity influences on consumer decision making: New insights and research directions. *Journal of Marketing Management*, 35(3), 11–14.

In the first stage, culturally derived meanings become encoded in the celebrity figure itself. Through repeated exposure, whether via film roles, social media content, public appearances, or journalistic coverage celebrities develop layered identities that audiences come to associate with specific qualities, values, and ways of being in the world. This gradual sedimentation of associations is what enables celebrities to function as what might be called carriers of condensed cultural meaning: figures in whom particular social ideals or aesthetic values are seen to be embodied.

The second stage involves the deliberate migration of those meanings onto consumer products through marketing communication. When a celebrity is brought into association with a brand, the campaign's design is oriented toward activating specific aspects of the celebrity's symbolic profile and aligning them with the brand's desired identity. This is not a passive process of mere juxtaposition. Effective campaigns carefully orchestrate visual language, narrative framing, and contextual cues to amplify selected associations while subordinating others. If the strategy is executed successfully, consumers begin to attribute to the product the very qualities that had previously been attached to the celebrity transforming the product into a symbol.

The third and final stage shifts the locus of action to the consumer. Having encountered a product invested with celebrity-derived meaning, consumers may choose to appropriate that meaning by incorporating the product into their daily lives. Crucially, this appropriation is not automatic: simply owning a product does not guarantee the internalisation of its symbolic value. Meaning becomes personally significant only through active use and integration into everyday practices and self-presentation. Consumption, in this framework, is not a passive act of acquisition but an ongoing contribution to the project of identity construction. Celebrities occupy a privileged position in this final stage precisely because they publicly model this process of self-fashioning. Their personas serve simultaneously as aspirational templates and as reservoirs of symbolic material that consumers may draw on to articulate who they are or who they wish to become¹⁰.

What distinguishes meaning transfer theory from earlier endorsement frameworks is its scope. Rather than seeking to explain endorsement effectiveness in terms of a single celebrity attribute, it situates the phenomenon within the broader cultural circulation of meaning, accounting for why certain celebrities attract attention, why they lend credibility, and, more

¹⁰ G. McCracken, (1989). Who is the celebrity endorser? Cultural foundations of the endorsement process. *Journal of Consumer Research*, 16(3), 314–318.

fundamentally, how the symbolic capital they have accumulated can be mobilised to construct brand meaning and shape consumer self-concept.

This perspective gains additional analytical power when applied to contexts where the connection between celebrity and brand extends beyond a fixed promotional arrangement. As the degree of integration deepens the symbolic exchange between persona and product intensifies correspondingly. The celebrity is no longer functioning as an external communicator but is becoming structurally embedded in the brand's identity. It is this shift from temporary association to architectural integration that marks the transition from conventional endorsement toward forms of celebrity involvement that approach ownership. The following section examines precisely this transition and the implications it holds for the dynamics of meaning transfer¹¹.

2. From Traditional Endorsements to Celebrity-Owned Brands

Celebrity endorsement has long served as one of the most widely deployed tools in commercial communication. At its most fundamental level, the practice is premised on a straightforward objective: by placing a recognisable individual in proximity to a product, brands seek to attract consumer attention, stimulate positive emotional associations, and ultimately translate that engagement into purchasing behaviour. In an increasingly saturated media environment, where audiences are exposed to vast volumes of advertising content on a daily basis, the logic of using celebrity faces to cut through the noise has considerable strategic appeal. Endorsement functions, in this sense, as a shortcut - a mechanism for rapidly activating pre-existing emotional responses that consumers have already developed toward a particular public figure and redirecting them toward a product¹².

It is also important to understand the phenomenon of celebrity entrepreneurship. The conceptual boundary between endorsement and entrepreneurship is not always easy to draw. Celebrities may hold equity stakes in brands while contributing little beyond their name; they may exercise genuine creative and managerial influence without formal ownership. What meaningfully distinguishes the celebrity entrepreneur from the celebrity endorser is not simply the presence of a financial interest but the combination of ownership and active participation in running the venture. A celebrity who licenses their name to a manufacturer while remaining operationally detached occupies a position closer to endorsement than entrepreneurship,

¹¹ S. Tian, W. Tao, & others. (2021). Meaning transfer in celebrity endorsement and co-branding: Meaning valence, association type, and brand awareness. *International Journal of Advertising*, 41(6), 3–6.

¹² M. M. Khan, Z. Memon, & S. Kumar, (2019). Celebrity endorsement and purchase intentions: The role of perceived quality and brand loyalty. *Market Forces, College of Management Sciences*, 14(2), 99–101.

however the arrangement may be presented publicly. True celebrity entrepreneurship, by contrast, involves the celebrity as a constitutive element of the business itself shaping its direction, embodying its values, and assuming accountability for its outcomes. This distinction carries substantial implications for the dynamics of meaning transfer. In a conventional endorsement arrangement, the celebrity's symbolic capital is borrowed temporarily and deployed in service of a brand whose identity has been constructed independently. The strategic advantages of this deeper integration are considerable. Where endorsement offers a temporary and contractually bounded transfer of meaning, entrepreneurship enables a permanent and structurally embedded one. Consumers who engage with a celebrity-owned brand are not simply responding to a promotional association; they are engaging with what presents itself as an authentic expression of the celebrity's actual identity, their aesthetic preferences, personal values, and lived experiences¹³.

3. Case Study-Rare Beauty

The landscape of celebrity-owned beauty brands has expanded considerably over the past decade, spanning a wide range of categories, aesthetics, and strategic positioning. Among these ventures, Rare Beauty founded by Selena Gomez and launched in 2020, stands out as a particularly instructive case for examining how meaning transfer operates when it reaches its fullest expression in the context of celebrity entrepreneurship. What distinguishes Rare Beauty from many of its counterparts is the degree to which the brand's identity is not constructed around a product category or an aesthetic trend, but around a coherent set of personal values that Gomez has publicly embodied over many years. Among those values are mainly self-acceptance, mental health advocacy, and the rejection of unrealistic beauty standards. This alignment between founder and brand is neither coincidental nor superficial. It is the result of a deliberate strategic decision to build a company whose commercial purpose and social mission are structurally inseparable, making Rare Beauty a textbook illustration of meaning transfer theory applied in its most integrated form.

As established in the theoretical section of this paper, meaning transfer theory describes a three-stage process through which culturally derived meanings migrate from a celebrity persona to a product, and from a product to the consumer. In the case of Rare Beauty, each of these stages is enacted with unusual clarity and consistency, making the brand a compelling empirical illustration of the model.

¹³ E. Hunter, (2009). *Celebrity entrepreneurship and celebrity endorsement: Similarities, differences and the effect of deeper engagement*. Jönköping International Business School.

In the first stage of the model, meaning accumulates in the celebrity figure through repeated mediated exposure and public narrative. Selena Gomez's cultural persona has been shaped not only by her career as a recording artist and actress, but significantly by her willingness to speak openly about deeply personal experiences. These disclosures, sustained over more than a decade of public life, have constructed a persona defined by vulnerability, honesty, and resilience. Gomez herself has described her public positioning around mental health not as a branding strategy but as an expression of genuine conviction. The meanings she carries is authenticity, self-acceptance, the courage to be imperfect are not attributes assigned by a marketing team; they are the product of years of lived and publicly narrated experience that audiences have followed and internalized¹⁴.

The second stage of meaning transfer involves the deliberate migration of these accumulated meanings onto a product through marketing communication and brand design. In the case of Rare Beauty, this migration is enacted at every level of the brand's architecture. The brand's founding mission statement „To help everyone celebrate their, individuality by redefining what a beautiful means. We want to promote self acceptance and give people the tools they need to feel less alone in the world.” translates Gomez's personal values directly into brand language. The commitment that one percent of all product sales, not profits, would be donated to the Rare Impact Fund for youth mental health was announced before a single product reached the market, establishing from the outset that the brand's commercial activity and its social purpose were one and the same. Product design reinforces this logic: foundations are offered in an exceptionally wide range of shades, packaging is designed for ease of use by people with limited dexterity, and the brand's communication consistently foregrounds real people and unfiltered moments rather than aspirational or heavily edited imagery. The result is a brand in which the meaning of the founder (her values, her struggles, her commitments) is not layered onto a pre-existing product identity but is constitutive of it¹⁵.

The third and final stage of meaning transfer is realised when consumers appropriate the brand's symbolic content and integrate it into their own identity. For Rare Beauty, this stage is actively cultivated through the construction of a community rather than merely a customer base. The brand's social media channels most notably its Instagram account, which has amassed almost nine million followers function not as conventional advertising platforms but as spaces for shared experience, mental health resources, and mutual affirmation. The hashtag

¹⁴ L. Feldman, (n.d.). *How Selena Gomez is revolutionizing celebrity beauty*. Time. <https://time.com/6979619/rare-beauty> (Accessed March 5, 2026).

¹⁵ Rare Beauty by Selena Gomez. (n.d.). *About us*. <https://rarebeauty.com/pages/about> (Accessed March 6, 2026).

#RareRoutine invites consumers to contribute their own content, positioning the act of using the product as a form of self-expression and community participation rather than simple consumption. The brand has also established a Mental Health Council composed of professionals from academia, clinical practice, and advocacy, whose role is to co-create content and ensure that the brand's mental health communication is substantive rather than performative. Consumers who engage with Rare Beauty are not merely purchasing a cosmetic product, but they are participating in a community organised around values they share with the brand's founder¹⁶. Table 1., Summarises how each pf McCracken's meaning transfer model is enacted within Rare Beauty's brand strategy, illustrating the alignment between theoretical mechanism and practical application.

Table 1. The three stages of meaning transfer in Rare Beauty

Stage	Theoretical mechanism	Rare Beauty in practice
Stage 1	Through repeated mediated exposure and public narrative, the celebrity becomes a carrier of condensed cultural meaning.	Selena Gomez's decade-long public openness about mental illness, autoimmune disease and social media withdrawal constructed a person defined by authenticity, vulnerability and resilience. It is a meaning accumulated through lived experience.
Stage 2	Through deliberate brand communication and design, the celebrity's symbolic profile is aligned with and embedded into the brand's identity.	Mission statement cantered on self-acceptance, 1% of sales committed to the Rare Impact Found before launch, inclusive shade range, accessible packaging, all translating Gomez's personal values directly into brand architecture.
Stage 3	Customers actively integrate the products symbolic content into their own self-concept through use and community participation.	#RareRoutine invites user-generated content, Instagram functions as a space for shared experience rather than advertising. Consumers participate in a value-based community, not merely a consumer base.

Source: own elaboration based on Rare Beautybrand communication and McCracken, G. (1989). Who is the celebrity endorser? Cultural foundations of the endorsement process. *Journal of Consumer Research*, 16(3), 314–318.

The market outcomes of this approach are reflected in the brand's sustained competitive position within one of the most crowded segments of the beauty industry. Rare Beauty consistently ranks as one of the top-selling brands at Sephora - and holds the number one position in the blush category by sales, a distinction that becomes particularly significant given how intensely contested that category has become in recent years. Additionally, brand's

¹⁶ Rare Beauty [@rarebeauty]. (n.d.). *Instagram*. <https://www.instagram.com/rarebeauty> (Accessed March 15, 2026).

performance on metrics that go beyond single-purchase behaviour: data from market analysts indicates that Rare Beauty demonstrates one of the highest repeat purchase rates in its category, suggesting that consumer engagement does not dissolve after the first transaction but compounds over time. This pattern of sustained loyalty is consistent with what meaning transfer theory would predict, when a brand successfully integrates meaningful symbolic content into its identity content that consumers can genuinely adopt as part of their own self-concept. The relationship it builds is not transactional but relational¹⁷.

Conclusion

This paper has examined meaning transfer theory as a framework for understanding how celebrity-owned brands construct identity and generate consumer resonance. The analysis has shown that the model's three-stage process, whereby meanings accumulate in a celebrity's public persona, migrate into a product through brand communication, and are ultimately appropriated by consumers as resources for self-construction offers a more complete account of celebrity brand influence than conventional endorsement frameworks focused on isolated attributes. The case of Rare Beauty demonstrates this process with particular clarity. Selena Gomez's decade-long public narrative around mental health, vulnerability, and self-acceptance provided the symbolic foundation from which the brand's identity was built, not as a marketing strategy layered onto a product, but as its constitutive logic. The consistency with which this meaning is enacted across every dimension of the brand, from product design to community building and social advocacy, explains both the depth of consumer engagement and the brand's commercial performance of four hundred million dollars in annual sales within four years of launch. The findings suggest that meaning transfer theory retains strong explanatory relevance in contemporary brand contexts, and that its power intensifies when the celebrity is not an external endorser but the founding core of the brand itself.

Of particular value would be research examining consumers who actively participate in brand communities such as those cultivated by companies owned by celebrities - exploring how depth of engagement relates to the intensity of meaning appropriation and its effect on brand loyalty and self-concept. Such a study is currently being conducted by the author as part of an ongoing research project, and its findings are expected to contribute further empirical grounding to the theoretical framework presented here.

¹⁷ N. Lobad, (n.d.). *The top 10 blush brands at Sephora—From Rare Beauty to Dior*. WWD. <https://wwd.com/beauty-industry-news/beauty-features/top-blushes-sephora-rare-beauty-dior-haus-labs-1236850523/> (Accessed March 6, 2026).

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