

The Exploration of Greenwashing in the Beauty Industry

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Introduction:

More than ever, consumers want to pursue direct actions that will promote better environmental behaviors around them. Adapting their consumption patterns is seen as a constructive way that they can achieve that. Pressures to preserve and protect a better world, and to live out a sustainable livelihood is more than just a trend.

These pressures have made their ways into the beauty industry effecting the haircare, skincare, and makeup categories. In an already saturated industry, indie brands are successfully executing the environmental image that many consumers are demanding, and established key leaders are also following suit. However, a practice not as worthy has been introduced as well – greenwashing.

Greenwashing is defined as “a process of conveying a false impression or providing misleading information about how a company’s products are more environmentally sound. Greenwashing is considered an unsubstantiated claim to deceive customers into believing that a company’s products are environmentally-friendly” [18].

Consumers are showing a desire to invest in products that exemplify some aspect of greenness, and companies are aware that this is prominent. Since 2017, sustainable claims in the personal care have increased by 238% [7]. This emergence has allowed for companies to rebrand to create a green image and new approach that puts environmentalism or sustainability at the forefront of their strategy. As limited regulation exists for environmental claims and defining language, consumers buying ‘green’ is subjective.

The biggest issue is that consumers need to understand the likelihood that an environmental claim can be exaggerated, unsubstantiated, or untrue but the unfortunate matter is that they do not. Consumers will build a ‘green trust’ or ‘green loyalty’ with their organizations [9] as long as the organization decreases a consumer’s ‘green confusion’ through its ‘process’ [2].

To study the issue of greenwashing and consumer behavior in the beauty industry, over 200 individuals were surveyed about their purchasing decisions, their knowledge of greenwashing, and their preferences of personal care products.

Materials & Methods:

The research presented is solely on the third method that I used to capture greenwashing and environmental influence. The first method was to determine if a population knew what greenwashing was to begin with, while the second method served as a pilot survey to understand if there was interest in the topic presented. These two preliminary methods lead to the creation of a third, and final Institutional Review Board (IRB) survey created through Qualtrics software and distributed through social media platforms from April 2020 through July 2020 to individuals eighteen and older.

Method I	Method II	Method III
Instagram Poll	Pilot Google Form Survey	Qualtrics Survey
One Question	14 questions	Required IRB Approval
“Do you know what greenwashing is?”	Distributed via: GroupMe	28 questions
Target Audience: Not defined	Target Audience: Women ages 18-23	Distributed via: Facebook, Instagram, & GroupMe
(111 responses)	(40 responses)	Target Audience: Anyone 18+ (204 responses)

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References:

[2] Chen, Y.-S. & Chang, C.-H. (2013). Greenwash and Green Trust: The mediation effects of green consumer confusion and green perceived risk. *JSTOR*.
 [7] Grady, B. (2022). UN Sustainable Development Goals and Ingredient Development. *Sustainable Cosmetics Summit*.
 [9] Javel, T., Yang, J., & Goh, W.C. (2020). The Sustainability claim: impact on a consumer’s green perception and behavioral intention: A case study of H&M. *Advances in Management & Applied Economics*, 10, 1-22.
 [18] Kenton, W. (2022). *Greenwashing*. Investopedia.
 1. Full references are available in my complete paper online.
 2. 204 participants began the study.
 3. Based on 187 responses.
 4. Haircare based on 211 responses, Skincare based on 240, and Makeup on 372. Total number of responses for locations most shopped at were based on 435 Selections.
 5. Commonly searched for ingredients based on 73 responses. Most common Environmental adjectives seen used was based on 477 Selections.
 6. Question 1 was based on 187 responses, Question 2(A) was based on 28 responses, and Question 2(B) was based on 160 responses.

Results & Discussion:

The results were classified into five sections: Demographics, Routine, Consumer Selections, Environmental Influences, and Greenwashing Effect.

Demographics:

90% identified as female and 10% male
Minimum age: 18, Maximum: 79, Median & Mode: 21, Mean = 32.14

Routine:



Consumer Selections:

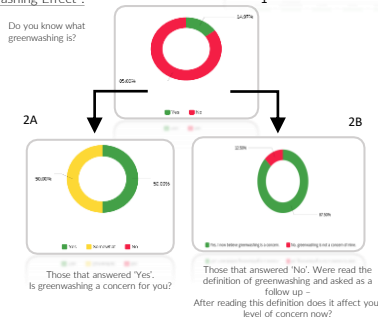
In order of Most Preferred (Top 5)
Haircare: Pantene, Biolage, Dove, Tresemmé, Redken
Skincare: Neutrogena, Cetaphil, Aveeno, Olay, Clean & Clear
Makeup: Maybelline, Covergirl, L’Oreal, Bare Minerals, Neutrogena

Purchases most likely made at:
Target - 27.93%
Ulta - 19.72%
Walmart - 15.73%
Walgreens - 9.62%
CVS - 7.75%
Online - 10.33%
Other - 8.92%

Environmental Influences:



Greenwashing Effect:



In this research, it was found that consumers are aware of the rise in green products in the market, but their readiness to decipher environmental messaging is underdeveloped. They are driven by the value that green products present, but are focused on their personal motivations, not necessarily whether a company is doing this correctly. Participants showcased that environmental intentions require individual needs, while some may care about ingredients, others may care about packaging, while another may care about both. This presents environmental prioritization and what matters most to a consumer is subjective. However, many participants agreed that government should have oversight of environmental attributes to create a standard of harmonization to exist within the beauty industry.

Conclusions:

ENVIRONMENTAL INTENTION -

What is the ‘Why’ behind their product selections?

BRAND LOYALTY & RECOGNITION -

What keeps one coming back and what does detection and recollection look like?

CONSUMPTION VALUE -

As a consumer, what do we regard as the most important part of our purchasing power?

The purpose of this study was to investigate Greenwashing in the beauty industry and how it affects consumer behavior in both positive and negative ways. While many participants were unaware of the term, ‘Greenwashing’ and what it means, it was important that they were allowed to see the definition, comprehend the language, and then were re-asked if Greenwashing was a concern. Results showed they were more likely to say it was a concern for them. This shows that consumers have the capability to adjust their subjective impressions increase objective accuracy if given the opportunity. Surveys are created to assess present actions and behaviors, but researchers would learn more if they gave participants the ability to learn through the survey process and take away new explanations upon completion. It was evident that environmental attributes influence consumers. Often, if they intend to buy a sustainable marketed product, they will opt for a label displaying environmental benefits, and would favor a graded system that evaluates holistic environmental profiles beyond sole product claims. The products they gravitate towards are more likely to be owned by large parent companies that take up a large market share in the personal care industry. Moving forward, this research showed that participants can more critically evaluate green marketing if they have better knowledge about Greenwashing, and therefore can judge whether the claims are valid. Companies should increase education to consumers through reliable information from angles such as packaging, website landing pages, social media posts, and harmonizes efforts between organizations to create a dependable standard that can influence large government bodies like the FDA. The future of green cosmetics is opportunistic for companies, their power to reach the needs of consumers is greater than ever and the territory to launch is wide. It is in the best interest to be proactive in the age of ‘green cosmetics’, because before you know it, it will be a priority for everyone.