NAVIGATING THE PATH FROM ECO-FRIENDLY PRODUCTION TO CONSUMER CHOICES IN COSMETICS

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Abstract

The cosmetics industry faces significant challenges, particularly in meeting consumer demands for sustainable and eco-friendly products. This article examines how the industry adapts to these demands by focusing on sustainability throughout the product lifecycle, including selecting raw materials, packaging, and marketing strategies. The shift towards sustainability in the cosmetics industry is not merely a response to regulatory pressures but also a strategic move to align with a consumer market that increasingly values authenticity and environmental responsibility. For this purpose, semi-structured in-depth interviews were conducted. The research aimed to identify consumer knowledge regarding sustainability, influence on buying behavior, preference for sustainable packaging, and reaction to marketing efforts, thereby providing insights into consumer engagement with sustainability in the cosmetics industry. This paper provides a detailed analysis of sustainability dynamics in the cosmetics industry, offering valuable insights for individuals and organizations seeking to understand and engage with this evolving domain.

Keywords: *sustainability, cosmetic, eco-friendly, sustainable packing, sustainable cosmetic*

JEL: *Q56, L65, Q50, Q53*

1. Introduction

Today's cosmetics industry is witnessing a remarkable transformation thanks to the advent of cutting-edge green technologies. These innovations are pivotal in revolutionizing cosmetic products, thus enabling the development of eco-friendly and sustainable natural cosmetics. This trend perfectly aligns with the ever-increasing demand for beauty solutions that are safe for the environment and in harmony with nature.

In the present scenario, a green strategy has become vital for business sustainability. However, only a few companies can successfully implement such strategies at an organizational level (Chin et al., 2018). The terms "green" or "environment-friendly" encapsulate a wide range of concepts, including values, attitudes, knowledge, understanding, and behaviors that consider the environment. Companies that execute environmental strategies effectively encourage consumers to opt for green products, which significantly contribute to the global movement toward environmental protection. This capability to actualize environmental initiatives is crucial as it aligns business operations with the growing consumer demand for sustainability and reinforces the company's role in global ecological conservation efforts.

In recent years, cosmetic products have become increasingly common in our daily lives. However, consumers have noticed a shift towards more eco-friendly and sustainable options. This trend can be attributed to the growing concern for ethical and environmental factors influencing

their purchasing decisions. As a result, there has been a surge in demand for cosmetic products that are safe, effective, and ethically and environmentally responsible (Appolloni et al., 2022).

This paper aims to deepen the understanding of consumer perspectives on sustainability in the cosmetics industry, examining how eco-friendly practices influence consumer behavior and choices. Central to this exploration is an investigation into the growing trend of sustainability and its impact from production to marketing, shedding light on the evolving relationship between consumer preferences and green initiatives in the beauty sector.

The paper is structured as follows: initially, it offers a comprehensive review of current sustainability practices in the cosmetics industry and examines consumer awareness and perception of these practices. This is followed by an in-depth interview analysis of the findings from qualitative research, which includes responses to targeted questions about the influence of sustainability on purchasing decisions, attitudes towards eco-friendly packaging, and the effectiveness of sustainable marketing initiatives. The paper concludes with a discussion of the implications of these findings for the cosmetics industry and outlines potential avenues for future research in this domain.

2. Literature review

The cosmetics industry is adapting to become more sustainable, responding to consumer concerns about environmental impact. According to Regulation (EC) No 1223/2009, a cosmetic product comprises substances or mixtures intended for application on external body parts or the teeth and oral mucosa. They are primarily used for cleaning, perfuming, altering appearance, protection, or correcting odors. This regulation underlines the broad scope of products considered cosmetics and emphasizes the industry's focus on safety and sustainability in line with consumer expectations (European Parliament 2009).

Consumers are becoming increasingly conscious of the issues related to cosmetic products, resulting in a greater preference for natural, green, and organic options. These options are perceived as healthier, and the awareness also extends to social concerns, such as child labor and environmental issues like the use of synthetic ingredients, deforestation, and animal exploitation. As a result, the supply chain has adapted to cater to these preferences by offering more sustainable ingredients. The movement towards sustainability has been further accelerated by the COVID-19 pandemic, which has impacted various consumer goods sectors, including cosmetics. This has resulted in more stringent sustainability legislation to ensure sustainable practices are followed (Culliney, 2021).

2.1. Cosmetics

In 1984, Albert Kligman created the term 'cosmeceuticals' by combining 'cosmetics' and 'pharmaceuticals' to describe a new category of products that combines aesthetic enhancement with therapeutic benefits. These products are designed to improve appearance and offer health-related advantages, effectively bridging the gap between traditional cosmetics and pharmaceuticals (Vaishali et.al, 2013). Dermatocosmetics is a field that combines dermatology and cosmetics to create products that promote healthy skin while addressing specific issues such as aging, acne, and sensitivity (Dreno et al., 2014). This industry increasingly adopts sustainable practices in response to consumer demand for effective and environmentally responsible products. Key considerations include using sustainable and ethically sourced ingredients and formulations free from harmful chemicals and focusing on plant-based, organic, and naturally derived components. Packaging is also evolving towards recyclable, biodegradable, or recycled materials to reduce the environmental impact.

According to European Commission (2015), cosmetics are defined as "any substance or mixture intended to be placed in contact with the external parts of the human body (epidermis, hair system, nails, lips and external genital organs) or with the teeth and the mucous membranes of the oral cavity with a view exclusively or mainly to cleaning them, perfuming them, changing their appearance, protecting them, keeping them in good condition or correcting body odors".

2.2. Sustainability in the cosmetic industry

The cosmetics industry and academic and research communities pursue sustainable production practices at every stage. This transition is gaining momentum due to a confluence of factors extending beyond the industry (Bom et. al, 2020).

Consumer awareness and demand for eco-friendly products are increasing. People are now better informed and more concerned about the ingredients in their cosmetics, their impact on health, and the ecological footprint these products leave behind. This demand from consumers is driving the industry to innovate and offer products that are not only effective but also environmentally responsible.

Additionally, various organizations, ranging from environmental advocacy groups to regulatory bodies, are increasingly scrutinizing the cosmetics industry. These entities are highlighting issues such as the ecological consequences of production processes, the carbon footprint of the industry, and the ethical implications of sourcing raw materials. For instance, there is a growing emphasis on avoiding ingredients that contribute to deforestation or the depletion of natural resources.

Social impact, including fair trade practices, is another critical consideration. The industry is being urged to ensure that the sourcing of ingredients and manufacturing processes are ethically sound, respecting the rights and well-being of workers and communities involved.

The cosmetics industry is grappling with various sustainability issues that require a multi-dimensional approach. These problems can be viewed from different angles, such as the perspective of consumers, the complexities of the supply chain, the sourcing of raw materials, and evaluating the sustainability of a product over the course of its entire lifecycle (Rocca et al., 2022).

Sustainability is essential in the cosmetics industry, covering the entire product lifecycle. However, selecting raw materials is a crucial aspect that needs more attention. This is because information about sustainable raw materials is often inaccessible and complex. Additionally, it is challenging to incorporate alternative, more sustainable ingredients into cosmetic products. These sustainable alternatives often face reduced performance, instability, and aesthetic constraints, hindering their widespread adoption and effectiveness in cosmetic formulations (Bom et al., 2019). The sustainability of a cosmetic product is significantly impacted by its packaging. Plastics are commonly used because of their lightweight and flexible properties, but they also contribute to pollution. Sustainable packaging options such as glass, biopolymers, and plant-based plastics are being explored to address this issue. However, the industry needs help balancing the protection and appeal of the product with environmental considerations. Therefore, strategies like reducing packaging layers and focusing on biodegradability, reuse, and recycling are becoming increasingly important (Cinelli et al., 2019).

Cosmetic companies must continuously innovate and create environmentally friendly products due to the shift in consumer preferences towards sustainability. This change is essential to maintain a competitive edge in a market where consumers expect a wide range of sustainable options. The journey towards sustainability presents obstacles, particularly in the formulation stage, where the choice of ingredients plays a crucial role in determining the product's environmental impact. Addressing ingredient sustainability during the design phase is pivotal, as it sets the foundation for the environmental impact of the entire product lifecycle.
(Cosmetics Europe - The Personal Care Association, 2017).

The Cegedim study (2023) on dermatocosmetic consumption in Romania reveals key trends: a marked increase in dermatocosmetics usage, with 10.8 million boxes purchased between July 2022 and June 2023, and a 19.1% rise in the first half of 2023 compared to the same period in 2022. The market value reached 600.2 million lei (about 121.8 million euros) that year, with a 31.2% increase in early 2023, indicating a growing consumer investment in quality cosmetic products. The market is primarily driven by facial care (40.2%), body care (20.1%), and hair care products (18.0%), which collectively represent around 78% of the market value.

The growth in the dermatocosmetic market in Romania suggests that consumers are increasingly aware of and interested in products that offer both cosmetic and therapeutic benefits. This trend is an opportunity for cosmetic companies to focus on sustainability in their product development, especially in popular segments like facial and body care, aligning with the broader global movement towards eco-friendly and ethically produced cosmetics.

To summarize, the cosmetics industry's transition towards sustainability is complex and involves various aspects like ethical sourcing, environmental stewardship, social responsibility, and technological innovation. It necessitates a significant change in how the industry operates and interacts with the planet and society.

3. Research methodology

The study followed a comprehensive methodology that involved conducting in-depth interviews (Boyce et al., 2006) to understand the impact of sustainability in the cosmetics industry. The research process was multi-staged and thorough. In-depth interviews are a qualitative research method typically used to gather detailed information from a limited number of participants. These interviews involve asking open-ended questions, which encourage a more exploratory and conversational communication style. The main goal of these interviews is to comprehensively understand the interviewee's attitudes, experiences, or perspectives on a particular topic. Initially, it involved careful planning to outline the study's scope and objectives. The next step was to develop a set of interview questions designed to elicit detailed information on sustainability in the cosmetics industry.

The primary goal of the research was to examine consumer behavior and perceptions concerning sustainable cosmetics. The qualitative method of conducting in-depth interviews effectively explored complex topics and gathered unique perspectives on sustainability in the cosmetics industry. The study, conducted online in December 2023 using the Zoom platform, involved a diverse group of 20 female participants from Brașov, Romania. We researched a group of individuals who regularly use cosmetic products and have diverse professional backgrounds. Their varied income and educational levels helped broaden our understanding of consumer behavior regarding sustainable cosmetics. Our study also included environmentally conscious women, providing valuable insights into preferences and behaviors towards eco-friendly cosmetic products. The interview group's composition was essential in capturing a wide range of perspectives, perfectly aligning with our in-depth interview methodology.

The research aimed to achieve the objectives shown in Figure 1.

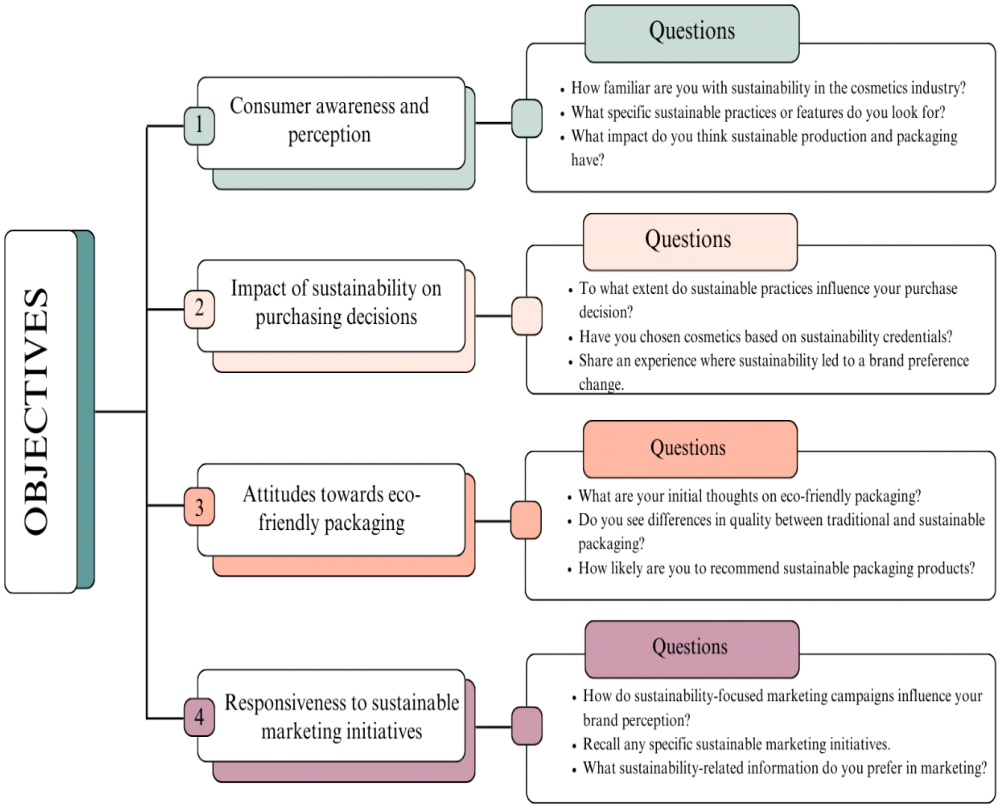


Figure 1: Objectives of the research
Source: Authors' own research

O1: Consumer awareness and perception

This objective investigates how much consumers know about sustainable practices in the cosmetics industry and their impact on product quality and effectiveness. By examining their familiarity with eco-friendly initiatives and attitudes towards them, we can better understand how well-informed consumers are and how their knowledge and perceptions affect their buying behavior. The focus is on gauging consumer awareness, which plays a significant role in influencing their purchasing decisions.

O2: Impact of sustainability on purchasing decisions

This objective aims to explore the influence of sustainable production on consumer purchasing decisions in the cosmetics market. It aims to investigate whether sustainability credentials are a significant factor when consumers choose cosmetics and if such factors result in brand loyalty or preference changes. This research aspect highlights the practical impact of sustainability on consumer behavior and its role in shaping the cosmetics market.

O3: Attitudes towards eco-friendly packaging

The main goal is to comprehend the consumers' outlook on eco-friendly packaging in cosmetics. The study will analyze their first impressions, perceived distinctions in quality or performance versus conventional packaging, and their inclination toward recommending products with sustainable packaging. This objective is significant in comprehending the significance of packaging in consumers' decision-making process and its impact on market trends.

O4: Responsiveness to sustainable marketing initiatives

This objective assesses how marketing campaigns that highlight sustainability in cosmetics affect brand perception. It seeks to understand consumer recall of specific sustainable marketing

initiatives and the kind of sustainability-related information consumers desire. This insight is vital for cosmetic companies to tailor their marketing strategies effectively to meet consumer expectations and drive sustainable practices.

Through this objectives, the research aims to uncover new trends and opportunities in sustainable practices within the cosmetics industry, particularly focusing on areas such as eco-friendly production, packaging, and consumer attitudes.

As part of the study, we carefully considered several aspects, including the research design and participant recruitment process, data collection, data analysis, and interpretation and reporting. During the research design and participant recruitment process, we selected the research question and goals, established preselection criteria for participants, and conducted in-depth interviews. Respondents were not provided with predetermined categories of responses to avoid interviewer bias, and we encouraged them to express their thoughts in their own words. Data analysis and collection techniques were developed to identify themes and patterns through a thematic analysis approach. The instrument used to collect the data was a using a semi-structured, in-depth interview approach. During the study, ethical aspects were rigorously addressed, encompassing informed consent, ensuring the confidentiality and anonymity of data, and adhering to ethical protocols in data handling and processing. After collecting the data, we analyzed it based on research questions and objectives, identifying themes and patterns through a thematic analysis approach. Finally, we interpreted the results and delivered a report containing the significant findings.

4. Results

To comprehensively understand the outcomes, we have arranged the primary discoveries according to each objective. This approach guarantees that the significant insights gathered from the research are presented logically and correspond with the study's specific aims. By structuring the outcomes in this manner, readers can quickly examine the data, grasp the implications of each objective, and gain a more profound understanding of the overall results of the research.

O1: Consumer awareness and perception

The varying levels of awareness among participants indicate a diverse understanding of what sustainability in cosmetics entails. Many participants expressed a keen interest in aspects like product sourcing, manufacturing processes, and the overall environmental impact of their cosmetics choices. This curiosity underscores a growing consumer trend towards more conscious purchasing decisions. The interest in specific sustainable attributes, such as biodegradable ingredients and cruelty-free practices, reflects an evolving consumer mindset that values personal benefits and considers broader ecological impacts. This increasing consumer inquisitiveness suggests a potential market shift towards more transparent and informative branding and marketing strategies in the cosmetics industry.

O2: Impact of sustainability on purchasing decisions

The growing emphasis on sustainability in purchasing decisions indicates a broader transition in consumer values. More and more consumers are becoming environmentally aware and considering the ecological impact of their cosmetic choices. This is especially true among younger consumers, who tend to be more environmentally conscious and are willing to invest in sustainable products. Furthermore, many consumers view sustainable cosmetics as a societal responsibility rather than a personal preference, further impacting their purchasing decisions. These consumers often advocate for sustainable practices and influence others through social media and personal networks.

O3: Attitudes towards eco-friendly packaging

Participants' opinions on eco-friendly packaging reveal a delicate balance between environmental awareness and practicality. Concerns about the durability and appearance of sustainable packaging indicate a need for innovation in this field. While many consumers prefer to

reduce waste through packaging, they want to maintain the quality and aesthetics of the product. This trend presents an opportunity for cosmetic brands to invest in the development of environmentally friendly packaging that meets consumer expectations for functionality and design. Many respondents placed a high value on sustainable packaging, and if these needs are met, they are likely to become loyal customers.

O4: Responsiveness to sustainable marketing initiatives

The positive response to sustainable marketing initiatives highlights a growing consumer awareness about the environmental impact of their purchases. Many respondents appreciate marketing campaigns that transparently and honestly communicate sustainability efforts, showing a shift towards more ethical consumerism. They prefer genuine sustainability claims over superficial "greenwashing." This trend allows brands to differentiate themselves by offering in-depth insights into their sustainable processes and practices, thereby building customer trust and loyalty. This demand for greater transparency in marketing reflects a broader shift in consumer values, where ethical and environmental considerations are becoming crucial to purchasing decisions.

The study offers a deep dive into the evolving landscape of consumer attitudes toward sustainability in the cosmetics industry. It uncovers a growing awareness and interest in eco-friendly practices yet highlights a significant knowledge gap. Consumers increasingly consider sustainability in purchasing decisions, but cost and brand loyalty remain key factors. The optimistic view of eco-friendly packaging is tempered by concerns over functionality and design, suggesting a need for innovative approaches. The findings underscore a pivotal shift in consumer preferences towards sustainable practices, balancing environmental considerations with practicality and aesthetics. This comprehensive analysis illustrates the potential for the cosmetics industry to innovate, educate, and align with consumer expectations in sustainable beauty.

5. Conclusions

In summary, the cosmetics industry is actively adapting to an increasingly eco-conscious landscape, aligning with heightened consumer and regulatory demands for environmental responsibility. The transition in consumer behavior towards more sustainable choices is evident, with a clear preference for natural, organic, or green products. These choices are motivated by health concerns and a broader awareness of social and environmental issues, including unethical labor practices and ecological damage due to specific ingredients or processes. The pandemic has played a role in accelerating these changes, leading to an increased focus on sustainability within the cosmetics supply chain and prompting more rigorous environmental legislation.

The cosmetics industry's journey towards sustainability covers every stage of the product lifecycle, with a particular emphasis on selecting raw materials. One of the industry's significant challenges is the effective integration of sustainable ingredients since there are often trade-offs between environmental friendliness and product performance or aesthetic appeal. Another critical area is sustainable packaging, with the industry exploring alternatives to traditional plastics to reduce their environmental impact.

As consumer preferences evolve and move towards more eco-friendly products, cosmetic companies must continue to innovate to keep up with the market trends that increasingly value sustainability. This change involves overcoming challenges in product formulation and ingredient selection, which are essential in reducing the environmental footprint of cosmetics. The industry has recognized that this transformation is crucial for its future success and maintaining a harmonious relationship with the environment and society. By taking proactive measures to reduce its ecological footprint, the cosmetics industry aims to positively impact the world while simultaneously meeting the needs of its customers.

The limit of this paper is given by the qualitative nature of the research, which does not allow the extrapolation of the results but does not make the research any less valuable.

Drawing from the latest research and anticipating future developments, this discussion highlights the importance of continued innovation and ethical considerations in achieving sustainable beauty. It showcases the interplay between consumer demand, industry practices, and environmental impact and explores how these factors shape the cosmetics industry's future. This paper provides a detailed analysis of sustainability dynamics in the cosmetics industry, offering valuable insights for individuals and organizations seeking to comprehend and engage with this evolving domain.

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