

Are Beauty Brands Green or Green Washed? A Qualitative Study on Customers' Perception

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Received on : 07th July, 2024
1st Revised : 14th October, 2024
2nd Revised : 1st November, 2024
Accepted on: 10th November, 2024
Published on : 18th December, 2024

Cite this paper

Acharya, N., & Pokhrel, L. (2024). Are Beauty Brands Green or Green Washed? A Qualitative Study on Customers' Perception. *The International Research Management Science*, Vol. 9 (1), 27-38.

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Abstract

With growing awareness of environmental issues such as global warming and pollution, consumers are increasingly shifting towards green products. In response, beauty brands are promoting their products as sustainable. However, consumers have recently begun questioning the authenticity of these green claims. Drawing from behavioral reasoning theory (BRT), this paper investigates customers' perceptions of green beauty brands in Nepal. A qualitative approach using a convenience sampling technique was employed to reach eight beauty green consumers. Data were collected and analyzed by using semi-structured interviews and Braun and Clarke's thematic analysis respectively. The authors explored the evaluation of green practices, perceived factors supporting green practices, and perceived challenges as overarching themes. Additionally, a new theme of greenwashing perception emerged from a lack of transparency, accountability, and third-party verification of green beauty brands. To the best of our knowledge, this is one of the earliest qualitative studies to explore green practices among beauty brands in Nepal.

<https://doi.org/10.3126/irjms.v9i1.72708>

Keywords: Attitude, behavioral reasoning theory, green practices, greenwashing, thematic analysis.

1. Introduction

With increasing awareness of environmental issues such as acid rain and ozone layer depletion, consumers are increasingly demanding global efforts to restore ecological balance by seeking eco-friendly products (Vandermerwe & Michael, 1990). This growing societal concern about corporate environmental practices (Musgrove et al., 2018) places pressure on companies (Kim et al., 2017) to maintain a positive image. As a result, firms may sometimes exaggerate or mislead in their communications about environmental initiatives (Chen et al., 2013). Examples include Volkswagen's emissions scandal, Nestlé's criticized recycling initiative, and major banks accused of promoting "green investment" while supporting environmentally harmful industries (Robinson, 2022). Coca-Cola faces ongoing criticism for plastic pollution despite a 2030 retrieval goal (Pellegrino, 2023), and Unilever's initiatives, such as a controversial chemical recycling program, have raised concerns (Koons, 2022). Such misleading "green" claims raise concerns about the authenticity of environmental actions, especially in the beauty industry.

These cases expose widespread greenwashing, in which environmental claims align with brands' actions. False green claims not only undermine genuine competitive advantages (De Jong et al., 2018) but are also associated with negative impacts on financial performance (Testa et al., 2018). Lyon and Maxwell (2011) stated that greenwashing is common in corporations, involving selective disclosure, empty claims, questionable certifications, and misleading visuals to appear environmentally friendly. Especially, beauty brands engaging in sustainable practices often enjoy positive consumer perceptions, loyalty, and enhanced brand reputations (King & Lenox, 2001). Lyon and Maxwell (2011) stated that greenwashing is common in corporations, involving selective disclosure, empty claims, questionable certifications, and misleading visuals to appear environmentally friendly. Thus, understanding customers' perceptions of green brands in the beauty industry has become crucial for academia and practitioners.

Several research gaps have been identified after a thorough review of the literature on green practices. First, studies are scarce on the perception of customers regarding green beauty brands in the Nepali context (e.g., Gautam & Pokhrel, 2022). This highlights the need to investigate perceptions of green beauty brands in Nepal. Second, the application of a solid theoretical framework, such as behavioral reasoning theory, has been underutilized in this context. This study contributes to sustainability literature by investigating the perception of green products in Nepal. Third, Sahu et al. (2020) suggest that behavioral reasoning theory should be explored using more nuanced methodologies, such as qualitative approaches, to study green behaviors. In response to this call, the researcher employs a qualitative approach to investigate consumer perceptions of green beauty brands.

This paper provides important theoretical, managerial, and policy implications. Theoretically, it advances the green marketing literature by applying behavioral reasoning theory (BRT) to explore consumer perceptions of green beauty products. From a managerial perspective, beauty brands in Nepal can attract eco-conscious consumers by highlighting environmental benefits and promoting sustainability through green campaigns and advertisements. In terms of policy implications, the study offers valuable insights for Nepal's Ministry of Industry, Commerce, and Supplies (MOICS) to develop and implement green

regulatory frameworks, ensuring transparency and accountability in the marketing of green beauty products.

2. Study objective

Drawing from behavioral reasoning theory, the paper investigates the perception of customers regarding green beauty brands. This study answers the central question: are beauty brands green or green washed among Nepali customers?

3. Literature Review

3.1 Behavioral Reasoning Theory

The BRT is a theoretical framework that aims to understand, predict, and evaluate the decision-making process of individuals (Sahu et al., 2020). It focuses on two main constructs: values and beliefs, and reasons for and against a particular behavior (Westaby, 2005). The values and beliefs component examines the underlying beliefs and values that influence an individual's decision-making process, while the reasons for and against component explores the justifications and arguments that support or hinder a specific behavior (Westaby, 2005). BRT has been applied in various contexts, including consumer behavior, sustainability, employee behavior, charity, innovation, leadership decision-making, and more (Westaby, 2005). Its applicability in understanding consumer behavior and decision-making processes has been a subject of increasing interest among scholars and practitioners (Sahu et al., 2020). In this paper, we have applied BRT as a theoretical framework to understand how consumers' values, beliefs, and reasons for and against environmentally responsible behaviors influence their attitudes toward green beauty products.

3.2 Context of the study

Greenwashing, as defined by De Netto et al. (2020), occurs when companies spread false or deceptive information about their products' environmental merits to attract environmentally conscious consumers. This deceptive practice consistently harms consumers by causing misinformation and confusion, often impacting purchasing decisions and trust. Bladt et al. (2023) introduced a two-dimensional typology, categorizing greenwashing practices into six distinct types based on claim type and macro-level of initiation: hidden trade-off, no proof, vague claims, false labels, irrelevant claims, and lesser of two evils. Studies documented the harmful effects of greenwashing on consumer trust and brand perception, highlighting the importance of authentic and transparent sustainability practices. Santos et al. (2023) identified global greenwashing practices, including vague language, irrelevant claims, and hidden trade-offs. Examples include Volkswagen's emissions scandal, Nestlé's criticized packaging goals, and major banks accused of supporting industries linked to global warming (Robinson, 2022). Coca-Cola, despite a 2020 pledge, faces criticism for alleged false environmental claims, while Unilever's initiatives in Indonesia raise concerns (Pellegrino, 2023; Koons, 2022). These cases highlight widespread greenwashing, emphasizing the need for increased transparency, accountability, and scrutiny to ensure authentic sustainability and curb deceptive marketing (e.g., Koons, 2022; Pellegrino, 2023; Robinson, 2022).

In Nepal, Shrestha (2022) raises concerns about greenwashing in environmental and sustainable governance (ESG) investments, with companies making misleading sustainability claims. Authenticity problems arise when ESG funds are investigated for owning shares in industries that are not sustainable, even despite ethical guidelines. The Nepali Times (2021) criticizes Nepal's participation in COP26 as "greenwashing," questioning the feasibility of ambitious targets and highlighting contradictions in environmental policies. Pandey (2016) exposes greenwashing in climate conferences, where corporations sponsor despite high emissions, creating a false image of environmental responsibility. Therefore, it is logical to investigate factors exploring the perception of green beauty products among Nepali customers.

4. Research Methodology

4.1 Research Design

We applied a qualitative research approach and exploratory research design as it allows for a comprehensive investigation of green practices pursuing qualitative data to gain a deeper understanding of the phenomenon (Santos et al., 2023).

4.2 Participants and Recruitment

We selected information-rich green consumers who had prior exposure to beauty products and were promoted as environmentally friendly. Eight participants were purposively selected considering several criteria such as age, knowledge about green practices, and experience with the use of beauty products in the last 30 days. Participants were limited to eight because a point of saturation was reached as their responses became consistent, leading to the conclusion of further interviews (e.g., Marshall et al., 2013). Therefore, we decided that eight participants would be appropriate for this study.

4.3 Data collection and data analysis procedure

The first author conducted semi-structured, in-depth interviews from August 30 to September 30, 2023. Participants were fully informed about the research, provided consent, and had the option to seek clarification. We maintained the privacy of participants by using pseudonyms. To analyze interviewed data, this study applied Braun and Clarke's (2020) six-stage process of thematic analysis because it provides rich insights into participants' experiences and is well suited for early researchers due to its flexibility and user-friendly nature (Braun & Clarke, 2012).

4.4 Trustworthiness

We ensured the data was trustworthy by adhering to Lincoln and Guba's (1985) recommendations. Participants had access to their interview transcripts and, if needed, met in person to ensure authenticity. To make the findings more applicable in diverse settings, they were thoroughly discussed. Well-documented records, comprising original data, transcripts, and analytical ideas, were used to ensure the data's reliability (Nowell et al., 2017). The selection of theories, techniques, and analyses was justified, and the process of arriving at conclusions was detailed (Nowell et al., 2017).

4.5 Description of participants

Eight participants voluntarily participated in this study, sharing their experiences of beauty green brands. Table 1 presents the pseudonyms, and ages of participants, arranged according to the sequence of their interviews and participant numbers. The themes are carefully categorized into four sections, each addressing one of the four sub-questions. Participant quotes, labeled with "PN" (participant number) and their corresponding ages, are used to support the identified themes. Additionally, personal reflections on the theme development process are included at the end of each relevant section. It is important to note that some participants' responses overlap, reflecting similarities across multiple themes.

Table 1. Description of participants

Participants Number (PN)	Preferred Pseudonym	Age
PN 1	SB	27
PN 2	SA	29
PN 3	Sharma	24
PN 4	Shrestha	37
PN 5	SB	43
PN 6	AN	27
PN 7	Paudel	24
PN 8	Chhetri	27

Note. Based on authors' interview

5. Data analysis

After the manual transcription of interviewed data, this study employed Braun and Clarke's reflexive thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2020). After multiple rounds of discussion between authors, we finalized our 24 final codes, and then the finalized codes were subcategorized into eight sub-themes. We finalized four sub-themes naming evaluation of green practices, perceived factors supporting green practices, perceived challenges of following green practices, and perceived greenwashing. As a result of these themes, participants developed attitudes towards green practices in the study.

Evaluation of Green Practices

This theme emerged from the consumers' emphasis on sustainability issues and mindful consumption. Consumers evaluate their green products by assessing the promotional activities of green products. It has emerged from consumers' values of becoming sustainable consumers with an awareness about environmental issues. A participant highlighted that the consumption of green products supports sustainable practices and could help preserve our environment:

"Green beauty products are linked to sustainability because of using eco-friendly packaging such as glass or recycled plastic and following sustainable production methods." (PN: 8, 27)

The progression of consumer mindfulness is a recent trend. A participant mentioned a statement that shows a shift in consumer focus towards responsibility and prioritizing green, sustainable choices when buying products:

“Now, we are seeing global effects, our mind is moving more towards green or more natural products. So as a customer, we should be aware of the ingredients we use and what possible effects our buying decision would cause to nature and this environment.” (PN: 1, 27)

Perceived Factors Supporting Green Practices

This theme emerged from green trends, strategies for competitive excellence, and perceived risk. To begin with the green trend, consumers are becoming green-conscious because of the rising consumer preference for eco-friendly products, signaling a shift towards sustainable and responsible purchasing habits. A participant shed light on why beauty brands are turning to green practices these years:

“The reason for green practices by brands could be that they have seen or realized consumers’ movement towards green, more natural products or the companies might have predicted that consumers could reach to that green point in future.” (PN: 1, F, 27)

Similarly, another participant highlighted the statement related to achieving competitive excellence by using beauty brands’ marketing strategies.

“I think, from one side, these brands are doing these green things for marketing purposes to sell more products by reaching out to wider audiences, (PN: 3, F, 24)”. The final theme underscores the concerns of consumers regarding the environmental and health impacts of products. The perceived risk of not using green products could motivate green consumption.

“The main concern would be on human health. Some people may encounter skin allergies after the use of green-washed products and may lose their lives if the condition becomes serious, (PN: 3, 24)”.

Perceived Challenges to Follow Green Practices

This theme encompasses various factors that may act as barriers or challenges to the widespread adoption of environmentally friendly and sustainable practices. It emerged from perceived deception about green products exaggerating natural ingredients, leading to potential trust issues between consumers and brands.

“When consumers eventually realize they have been deceived by a brand, they will stop purchasing from that company. It will eventually affect the financial health of the company as well as lose its reputation among the consumers.” (PN: 1, 27)

The expensive green products, the second sub-theme, focus on higher costs associated with green and sustainable products, posing an economic challenge for consumers and hindering widespread adoption.

“Real environmentally friendly practices need a lot of money for research, development, and use of sustainable materials.” (PN: 2, 29)

Perceived Greenwashing

Aligning with the previous themes, consumers perceived that greenwashing is an alarming issue for consumers. It could be the result of a lack of transparency, third-party verification, and a lack of ethical marketing practices by green brands.

“Because there’s no law in Nepal that criminalizes falsehood, there’s no provision of a fine in the Nepal Labor Act or other different acts. They hardly have any consumer protection act that is implementable in terms of greenwashing.” (PN: 5, F, 43)

The given statement emphasizes concern about brands being transparent about their products and their whole processes:

“My main concern is when brands can’t fulfill what they claim, then it’s better not to say anything. Additionally, most of the consumers don’t have the habit of doing research before buying the product so they may easily become victims of greenwashing. There should be transparency about products, their ingredients, and how they’re produced.” (PN: 8, 27)

6. Discussion and Conclusion

Using behavioral reasoning theory (BRT) as a framework, this paper examines whether the beauty brands are genuinely engaging in green practices or merely greenwashing. To achieve this, the study employed deductive reasoning through the lens of BRT. Interviews with eight green consumers were conducted, and thematic analysis was applied. From the analysis, four key themes emerged: evaluation of green practices, perceived factors supporting green practices, perceived challenges in adopting green practices, and perceptions of greenwashing.

First, we dissected the assessment of green practices as a sub-theme connected to Westby's green consumption values (2005). The values related to green practices serve as core principles that influence and steer people's decisions and behaviors toward goals they see as useful or valuable—such as sustainability and environmental protection. Evaluation of green practices emerged from emphasizing sustainability and consumer mindfulness. First, emphasizing sustainability is an emerging concept, such as the prior research Guide et al. (2003). Consumers emphasize recycling and waste reduction as green practices that can reduce environmental damage and promote sustainability. Likewise, consumers' awareness plays a crucial role in making informed decisions, ultimately contributing to human health protection. This result aligns with the research indicating that informed consumers are more likely to make environmentally

conscious decisions when purchasing products, thereby contributing to sustainable practices (Pokhrel et al., 2024; Jaiswal & Kant, 2018). The BRT argument lends credence to these sub-themes (Westaby, 2005). Second, we uncovered perceived factors supporting green practices as the second sub-theme. The reasons for green practices of Westby (2005) serve as factors in providing insight into the underlying motivations and justifications that influence individuals' actions and decisions. Perceived factors supporting green practices emerged from green trends, strategies for competitive excellence, and perceived risk. First, the green trend emerges from concepts like the prior research of Costa et al. (2021). This study reveals that consumers' movement towards green or more natural products might be one of the reasons for the beauty brands turning to green practices. Similarly, brands practice green for profit motives and sustainability in the competitive market. This sentiment aligns with research suggesting that green practices differentiate brands in the competitive market, meeting consumer demand for environmentally responsible products and gaining a competitive edge (Cherian & Jacob, 2012). Apart from this, brands also do green practices as a conscious effort to prioritize human health and well-being. This finding aligns with research indicating that by offering eco-friendly products and services, brands contribute to a healthier living environment and address consumer concerns regarding the impact of conventional products on personal health (Kim & Choi, 2005). This study highlights consumers' concern for human health and the environment as the reasons for brands going green.

Third, we uncovered perceived challenges as a sub-theme to follow green practices. Reasons against green practices serve as obstacles or challenges to the broad acceptance of environmentally friendly and sustainable practices (Pokhrel et al., 2024; Westby, 2005). Perceived challenges to follow green practices emerged from perceived deception and expensive green products. First, perceived deception is an emerging concept, like previous research by Leonidou and Skarmeas (2017). Misleading marketing tactics undermine consumers' trust in green practices, causing them to question the credibility and sincerity of brands' environmental initiatives. This study further reveals that income levels significantly influence consumer choices for green products, often prompting consumers to choose more affordable options. This finding resonates with the previous research, which states that financial constraint serves as a substantial barrier to the widespread adoption of green practices (Dangelico & Pujari, 2010).

Finally, a notable aspect that has come to light is the issue of perceived greenwashing. The identified issue revolves around a lack of stringent regulations and third-party oversight within the beauty industry. This aspect has raised concerns about greenwashing practices, where beauty brands are accused of employing misleading claims regarding their adherence to green or natural practices. Consumers, recognizing the significance of transparency, are urging the implementation of strict regulations to counteract deceptive green assertions within the beauty sector.

The results of this research paper carry implications in three main areas: theoretical, managerial, and policy. This paper has theoretically contributed by investigating green consumers' attitudes toward

green beauty practices in Nepal. While previous research studies focused on a quantitative approach, this qualitative investigation contributes to the existing literature by delving into the complex aspects of green practices (Pokhrel et al., 2024). This research sheds light on the psychological factors that influence consumers' eco-friendly product preferences and contributes to understanding consumer perspectives in the Nepalese context. Moreover, greenwashing perception regarding beauty brands can be considered a significant issue by Nepali and global brands because consumers are skeptical about green activities. From a managerial standpoint, this paper provides valuable insights into beauty brands in Nepal. Brands can use these findings to tailor marketing strategies that align with consumers' growing interest in eco-friendly products by conducting go-green campaigns or showcasing green claims in advertisements. Emphasizing the environmental benefits and showcasing a commitment to sustainability can help businesses differentiate themselves and attract environmentally conscious consumers. Investing in research and development for innovative eco-friendly formulations and packaging can further reduce their environmental impact. This not only differentiates beauty brands in the market but also contributes to a more sustainable future for Nepal's beauty industry. Moreover, this study provides insight to the MOICS about the status of green claims by beauty brands. The MOICS could formulate and implement regulatory frameworks and labeling standards to regulate and monitor the beauty industry in Nepal. This, in turn, fosters transparency and accountability in product advertising. Finally, policymakers can encourage businesses to go green by using these findings to increase consumer awareness about the environmental impact of beauty products and promote informed choices.

Despite the meaningful contributions, this paper identified several noteworthy limitations, and it is crucial to recognize them when interpreting the findings. First, there might be biases from the researchers while generating codes from the transcribed interview. The researchers might have used their presumptions while generating codes from the complex statements, which may not be the exact representation of the respective statement. Future studies could use multiple researchers for transcription interviews and generate codes to avoid bias. Second, the use of a relatively small sample size in the study raises concerns regarding the comprehensiveness of the findings, potentially neglecting the diversity of consumer attitudes across the Nepalese population. Future research endeavors could employ a mixed-methods approach, combining qualitative and follow-up quantitative analyses for a more comprehensive understanding of the subject. Third, participants' experience and context would be perceptual because green practices are a newer field of investigation. Future studies could apply lab-based experiments to investigate the authenticity of green practices.

Funding: The authors declare receiving no funding or financial support in carrying out the research.

Conflict of interest: Authors declare that they have no potential conflict of interest in the research work.

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