

Identifying Customers' Barriers to Buying Sustainable Beauty Products

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Abstract

Customers' more profound understanding of environmental issues plays a role in the swift growth of sustainable beauty enterprises. The desire of consumers to purchase sustainable beauty products has also increased, according to studies. Due to the pandemic, the sustainable beauty market will likely rise in the following years as people strive for a healthier, more environmentally conscious lifestyle. Firms also continually produce innovative products to satisfy their clients' demands and keep up with the rising competition. Researchers revealed how sustainable practices can increase brand loyalty and help firms succeed more competitively. Other experts, on the other hand, have noted that even knowledgeable clients of environmental issues are not purchasing these sustainable products. Negative customer perceptions emerge, and it is unclear how their behavior will alter. This study uses a qualitative method through thematic analysis to obtain the data. The form of data is statements from online conversations from social media and beauty communities. This study discovered that the barriers to buying from customers' view include the difficulty in searching for suitable products for their skin, the high price of the product compared to its quality, low trust in brands, poor product quality, poor product hygiene, and inadequate production process management by firms. These barriers also relate to their awareness of greenwashing marketing methods. These insights would benefit beauty firms willing to gain new target markets by emphasizing brand communication and practices that decrease customers' concerns about sustainable brands and lead them to product purchases. Firms could improve their product innovation to increase their performance, quality, and effectiveness to attract customers by communicating their sustainable practices through advertisements, value propositions, or product positioning.

Keywords: sustainable beauty; product purchase; barriers to buy

A. INTRODUCTION

Despite being challenged by the pandemic that has occurred in recent years, the beauty business has shown consistent development. According to (Gerstell et al., 2020), the first quarter sales induced by the pandemic unfavorable affected beauty firms, resulting in lower sales and the closure of offline stores. However, online sales of beauty goods have skyrocketed. The prediction from (Statista, 2022) is that the beauty business will continue to grow at a 3.8% annual rate. This suggests that the pandemic has minimal effect on the beauty sector. As a result of the pandemic, customers are looking for things that are safe, natural, and clean. Firms should be mindful of the items they sell and how they market them (Gerstell et al., 2020). With the growing popularity of the beauty industry, competition is increasing. Customers are ultimately driven to switch brands that they will use. As a result, to remain in business in a competitive environment, each company's long-term performance has become an essential aspect of corporate management, including the core sustainable performances (social, financial, and environmental) (Mahdi et al., 2019).

Previous studies have shown that buyers are eager to buy sustainable items to benefit future generations (Jacobs et al., 2020). Furthermore, research shows that 93 percent of buyers changed their thoughts due to the pandemic and now value sustainability (Cheung et al., 2022). Because of growing awareness of the importance of environmental protection, sustainability is an ecological customer issue (Steingoltz & DeVestern, 2022). On the other hand, different views from researchers also occur. According to (Chu, 2020), customers who understand the value of sustainability and the environment do not buy eco-friendly items because they have negative

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impressions of sustainable beauty products. They recognize the importance of environmental preservation but argue that protecting their skin is their priority. As a result, customers prefer buying products that will benefit their skin and solve skin problems. Customers who act like they want to purchase sustainable products in contrast to customers who genuinely spend money on environmentally friendly products (White et al., 2019).

The sustainable beauty terms itself relates to the context defined by (Bom et al., 2019), which is categorized into five phases of the beauty product life cycle's sustainability. The first phase includes design and sourcing, which considers the implementation of ethical sourcing in obtaining raw materials. This is followed by the second phase, packaging, which involves using recycled materials or reducing packaging materials on beauty products. The third phase, manufacturing, relates to how firms minimize water and energy usage in the production process of beauty products. The fourth phase, distributing, involves how firms are concerned about fuel usage's effect on product manufacturing processes' transportation. The fifth phase relates to the consumer's use of the products (including water and energy consumption). Lastly is the post-consumer use phase, which relates to consumers' disposal and waste management practices. The processes must be considered, knowing that customers nowadays define sustainability from how ethical they are and from all of the beauty product life cycle phases (Feng, 2016).

Meanwhile, the customers' barrier to buying products is based on the distinction between their views, expectations, and available product offerings (Tseng & Hung, 2013). According to (Feng, 2016), customers have difficulties determining which brands apply sustainable practices in their supply chain process. Therefore, customers' trust in the brand decreases, and they are unsure about purchasing sustainable beauty brands. According to (Larranaga & Valor, 2022), customers' evaluation of the sustainability of firms is highly related to their packaging (color, image, and material), the origin of the brand, and the brand's vendor to analyze its footprint on the supply chain process.

Consumers' views on the behavior-intention gap in sustainable beauty products are unclear. As a result, the purpose of this study is to collect data regarding customers' reasons for not purchasing sustainable beauty products despite knowing how essential it is to protect the environment. Previous studies took varied data collection methods and used keywords directly from writers; however, this study generated keywords from specific observations to general conclusions.

B. RESEARCH METHOD

The qualitative technique is used in this study to identify the customer barriers to purchasing sustainable beauty products. Data is gathered from online sources (beauty communities and social media), discussions, and remarks from customers who have previously used sustainable beauty products. The research framework is shown below. The qualitative method obtains in-depth customer views and opinions from specific to general information. In terms of the utilization of online sources to gain data, online platforms have been proven to give recommendations, insights, and opinions between skincare users that highly affect their product evaluation and purchase and help customers to learn through the groups that they can connect by having the same values in the form of text, audio, or video (Joshi et al., 2022; Sun et al., 2022).

Starting from the exploratory research, the authors obtained the information and thoughts of customers' barriers to buying sustainable beauty products through online statements from relevant social media and beauty communities. After that, the problem identification phase relates to identifying repeated keywords that are categorized to analyze the factors. The process is followed by a literature review, where authors compare the findings to previous research (articles, reports, journals). Next, data collection is conducted by compiling the statements of customers related to the barriers to buying sustainable beauty products. Data analysis is then conducted using thematic analysis through data coding into specific codes to measure frequency. Lastly, the authors would conclude the research by giving recommendations to the sustainable beauty industry and future researchers.

This research utilizes NVIVO software as a qualitative data analysis tool to help authors code the existing data gathered from online sources. The population of this research is the five online beauty communities selected, including Picky Beauty, Female Daily, Beauty Insider, Superdrug, and social media usage, Twitter. These communities have specific topics related to the sustainable beauty behavior of customers that could help authors to have relevant information. The sample includes conversations about the behavior-intention gap factors in choosing sustainable beauty products. Data is selected in the time range of 2020-2023, considering the effect of the pandemic. Keywords used to search samples include "sustainable beauty," "ethical beauty," "sustainable skincare," "eco-friendly skincare," and "eco-friendly skincare brand." Usage of data saturation is needed because of big data and population that is specified to people with shared values (Hennink & Kaiser, 2022). The method of qualitative data analysis used involves thematic analysis from selecting data with themes related to the research objective (Ali et al., 2021), determining data codes, and identifying naming for each category (Mihas, 2023). The total of statements gathered is 107 statements.

C. RESULTS AND ANALYSIS

The results identified six main barriers, shown in the table below. The barrier factors are ranked based on the highest to lowest frequency. The frequency is statements gathered from the five online beauty communities and social media mentioned before. To validate the data gained through secondary data, this research utilizes data source triangulation. Different sources from five online communities and social media were gathered to receive statements about customers' barriers to buying sustainable beauty products.

Table 1. Resume of Informant Statements

No	Barrier Factors	Frequency (Statements)	Percentage
1	Product Suitability	35	32.71%
2	Expensive Price	27	25.23%
3	Brand Trust	23	21.50%
4	Product Quality	11	10.28%
5	Supply Chain	9	8.41%
6	Product Hygiene	2	1.87%
		107	100.00%

Source: research data, 2023

Product Suitability (32.71%)

This topic addresses why customers do not purchase sustainable beauty products because they are not fit for their skin type. This is also caused by the poor performance of sustainable beauty brands, as shown in the statement, "I strongly dislike some of their products for performance issues." Even though they are aware and willing to protect the environment by purchasing sustainable beauty products, they face issues regarding finding suitable products for their skin type; shows on "Hiii, I often think about using more eco-friendly products, even though there are many choices now, but when it comes to beauty products, it is tricky, you cannot choose it carelessly. I have tried a few, and unfortunately, not all fit my skin type. It is a shame if you have bought it but do not use it". Thoughts about using non-sustainable products with safer ingredients also show: "But a lot of natural products do not work or aren't that good for our skin. So I would say if you want to go for a more natural approach, there are some brands out there you can try, but it is okay to go for 'regular' products too as long as you check the ingredients list".

Expensive price (25.23%)

The term "high price" refers to the emotion buyers get when the price is unacceptable compared to the product's performance. They anticipate higher efficiency from sustainable products due to the high price, shows on "...and to be honest, some products that label themselves "eco friendly" are even more expensive for the same function as the standard one... maybe that is also what makes people think about buying those products...". Feeling enthusiastic to test the products yet put off by the hefty price also appears on "I would love to try their products.

But the price is still far from my reach, to be honest". Other opinions expressed how people are pleased with the performance but believe the pricing is too high, shows in the statement, "I have tried lush face mask, honestly I would say it works well on my skin & I did not experience any breakout/ irritation/ dryness /redness. Yes, it has a strong minty smell which I am okay with, but maybe not for others. My face feels softer & smoother aft using this mask, I like it a lot, but it is a lil pricey".

Brand Trust (21.50%)

Customers' lack of brand trust originates from negative experiences due to skepticism. This might result from greenwashing marketing, shown in "...It has become difficult to tell differences between eco-friendly products and those that just perform greenwashing to enhance sales.". Therefore, customers do further research on the ingredients used in the products, shows on "Yes, I think this is mainly for marketing, but you should continue to do research on the efficacy and ingredients of products before purchasing" and "Unfortunately, just marketing, trying to make themselves look "safer" to spend money on while not having to prove that it is safer. Just because it grows outside does not mean it is good for us (for example, poison ivy), and we need preservatives or else most products will grow mold or expire within days/weeks. It is good to be aware of ingredients and what they do, but trying to make me fear something to not buy from other brand competitors upsets me". This relates to customers' opinions on how brands try to make them look sustainable without proof of brand communication.

Product Quality (10.28%)

This is due to the product's poor quality in their attempt to be sustainable, which shows how customers are concerned about the product packaging quality. "However, the lids are just like a milk carton dispenser causing the product to pour out. So you have to be very careful. Otherwise, you use too much". Besides, in the customer's opinion, skincare tends to have strong chemicals in their ingredients, and they felt it impossible to package the products with paper. The usage of glass also cannot protect the ingredients from heat. As mentioned before, price and quality are often associated. Some concern about product quality compared to its price also shows that "protecting the environment is okay, but the quality is not worth the price."

Supply Chain (8.41%)

Knowing that customers also perceive sustainable beauty brands from how they are responsible with the entire supply chain, concerns of skepticism towards a brand's unclear supply chain would also affect their product evaluation and purchase, shows on "Where is the product manufactured? The essence of using local products is to minimize emissions, if in the end it is produced in China, which I know a lot of local brands do, so the essence of eco feels like just on the surface". The concerns of not knowing where brands ethically extract the raw materials or not is also shows on "The eco-friendly ingredients are not necessarily better for the environment is I happen to work in the sustainability sector, in the end, I end up using eco-friendly products with essential oils, etc., they are not traceable, they are just as destructive, I do not know where they imported them and what route."

Product Hygiene (1.87%)

Finally, product hygiene is a concern when selecting sustainable beauty products. Sheet masks are a beauty product that is frequently connected with this. Some manufacturers advocate for more sustainable sheet mask packaging by combining multiple products in a single package. Packaging waste will be reduced manually as a result of this. However, views from customers describe how they feel the product would have lower hygiene, showing on "Not opposing eco-friendly, but sheet masks that come in a box of 8 are less hygienic". Customers also propose some alternatives in the sustainability of sheet masks, whether separating the serum with washable sheet masks or substituting it with wash-off masks.

Previous research also shows how higher prices of sustainable products affect customers in not purchasing these products because customers choose the brand's competitors, which often have sales and discounts (Barbarossa & Pastore, 2015). Besides, the lack of product accessibility and communication makes them not choose sustainable products. Another view from (Nath & Agrawal, 2023) also states that the behavior-intention gap of customers includes low performance, availability, and negative perceptions of customers to the brand. Not only price, trust in a brand, product attributes, availability, communication, and perceived effectiveness, but social influence also affects how customers evaluate their purchase decision (Hasan et al., 2018). Similarity to previous research is found through product performance, price, and brand trust concerns. However, some research is conducted on available green products and not specified in purchasing beauty products. Therefore, this research adds new insights from the beauty industry perspective, such as how customers view the supply chain as essential and product hygiene because it has contact with skin issues.

D. CONCLUSION

From the perspective of customers from online beauty communities, the barriers to purchasing sustainable beauty products include how difficult it is to find suitable products that contain ingredients that are compatible with their skin type, how the price is not reasonable compared to quality/performance, the skepticism towards brands which claims to be sustainable through greenwashing, decreased product quality caused by practices to reduce packaging/essentials to enhance product performance, unclear information about how the product is sourced and manufactured (to its whole supply chain process), and the lower product hygiene caused by how firms are aiming to reduce packagings.

This research's findings suit beauty firms seeking new target markets in developing their sustainable beauty brand. Due to the skepticism caused by greenwashing marketing, firms can build customer trust through green alliances. According to (Feng, 2016), three types of green alliances could be implemented to increase a brand's credibility, including product licensing (usage of environmental communities names for the brand), corporate sponsorship (being involved in activities related to environmental issues), and product endorsement (meeting the criteria and receiving certifications related to green practices). By this, firms can build their brand image to be more sustainable and trustable claims. This would solve the barriers, including low brand trust and lousy supply chain management.

Concerns about quality and performance that do not match the high price might lead corporations to lower the product price to attract new clients gradually. If beauty companies are still unsure about their performance, they must revise their advertising approach and avoid overstating their product claims. Customers can tolerate using a small number of synthetic substances, but firms cannot be claimed to be 100% sustainable. Firms may earn good responses from customers and customer trust by doing so.

This research is only focused on a qualitative research approach to gain the primary perceptions of customers regarding the barriers to buying sustainable beauty products. However, future research might be needed to analyze the variables' relationship and provide more in-depth information about the customer's opinions. Knowing that this research is only obtaining secondary data from online beauty communities and social media, future research could be done through different qualitative research approaches, such as conducting interviews for more detailed insights.

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