Clean, Dirty, and Everything in Between: Greenwashing and the Beauty Consumer

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Introduction

The world of cosmetics seems to be forever evolving, adopting new terminology, and introducing new products constantly. From skincare to lipstick, the modern consumer has a plethora of options to best fit their needs. With the evolution of technology and performance quality, comes a subsection of goods to fit the times, "clean" "organic" and "non-toxic" beauty. Companies stamp one of these labels like a seal of approval on their products to inform the consumer they are doing good by purchasing an item that is, by the company's standards, deemed environmentally friendly. Marketing tactics such as the specific imagery and language are the vehicles of communication in terms of reassuring the consumer that they are doing well by environmental standards. This practice is called greenwashing. While many consumers may not grow skeptical of such labels and marketing, it is important to note that simply greenwashing, and not following with authentic sustainable efforts (which may be the case or not) is damaging to the achievements made by those dedicated to bettering current and preventing future environmental damage. Using loose language that is open to interpretation does more harm than good. For this reason, it is important to gauge the understanding of the consumer and contextualize the identity of a clean brand in juxtaposition to one that isn't, to comprehend what steps need to be taken towards actual sustainability, instead of surface-level "clean" beauty.

Literature Review

As far as clean beauty in the USA, there is no universally accepted definition due to the lack of regulations by the FDA. The Personal Care Products Safety Act is a bill that was introduced in 2017 that requires cosmetics companies to register their facilities with the Food and Drug

Administration (FDA) and to submit to the FDA cosmetic ingredient statements that include the amounts of cosmetic's ingredients. It has not yet passed. Companies must pay a facility registration fee based on their annual gross sales of cosmetics. The collected fees can only be used for cosmetic safety activities. (Feinstein, 2017). The wiggle room in a definition is what allows companies to label themselves as clean. Specifically speaking about Sephora's "clean beauty" stamp, it is awarded to "all brands that are formulated without these ingredients and more: parabens, sulfates SLS and SLES, phthalates, mineral oils, formaldehyde, formaldehyde-releasing agents, retinyl palmitate, oxybenzone, coal tar, hydroquinone, triclosan, and triclocarban" (Sephora, 2020) There is an extensive list available on their website that condemns certain ingredients as being dirty, and they claim to have met with brand founders and experts to create this list. It is also important to note that all "clean at Sephora" products contain less than one percent of synthetic fragrances. This distinction is made because there has been intense speculation on the dangers of fragrance, as well as the ambiguity from companies who use it since most of them do not disclose what their formula for fragrance is.

According to the American Marketing Association, marketing is the activity, set of institutions, and processes for creating, communicating, delivering, and exchanging offerings that have value for customers, clients, partners, and society at large (AMA, 2017). Greenwashing is "the 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 consumers into believing that a company's products are environmentally friendly."(Kenton, 2020). It is a deceitful marketing tactic that does not reflect the true intentions of a company or product but rather capitalizes on sustainability

efforts without putting in any of the work. Due to speculation about whether products or brands are green, the term "green skepticism" was born. Those who are green skeptics have doubts about the validity of the claims made by brands. Some of the marketing tactics used to communicate a "clean" product can be as minimal as changing a color. An example of greenwashing met with green skepticism is the McDonalds logo change in Europe. The famous fast-food company decided to change its logo in 2009 to promote a more eco-friendly image. (Barriaux, 2007) and have since (10 years later) tried to improve their environmental footprint by using less plastic in their packaging. The bar seemed to be fairly low when the decision was made towards a green logo. Many skeptics have criticized this choice, going as far as saying "it's a plus trying to be more environmentally friendly, but the changes are a bit tongue in cheek really, a bit tasteless. They're just doing it so that they look better to everybody but their food is still junk" (Barriaux, 2007). What is interesting about McDonald's and Sephora is their allegiance to the color green when marketing cleanliness. It begs the question, is green more than color?

Critical Reflection of past studies on greenwashing and consumer understanding

A recent 2016 study done in Australia focused on understanding the consumer's trust in a food and drink company's effort to be sustainable. Based on advertisements, the participants used the people, font, and language in the ads to decide on whether they trusted a company was being as green as their ad stated (Brouwer, 2016). The findings were as follows: Most of the participants gave environment-related responses when asked what thoughts arise when

viewing the marketing messages. Animal friendliness, health, safety, corporate social responsibility, and ethics were other topics that arose in participants' minds when looking at the marketing messages. Although these terms somewhat overlap they are not the same, implying that the use of green marketing does not mean the same to everyone. (Brouwer, 2016).When asked about trustworthiness, several participants consider themselves skeptical of marketing messages while at the same time assuming that those messages need to contain some sort of basic truth. To them, a marketing message can be a bit exaggerated, but the information in the messages needs to rely on truth. The participants looked at tuna cans with different variations of logos and language, the green home-brand and the tuna brand were seen as trustworthy by the participants, due to one having a recycled logo and the other a dolphin-safe mark. Once the participants were given information about the specific wrongdoings of the companies involved in terms of marketing tactics, most participants somewhat changed their perception towards the disclosure of greenwashing practices. In their eyes, it became just another marketing strategy and there is something deceitful to almost all marketing messages of all companies. Overall, responses ranged from calling it "Shifty", mentioning "They're not lies, they're just exaggerating" to "All companies make these sort of claims" (Brouwer, 2016). Participants linked the greenwashing information to the initial impressions they held about the brands while discussing the impact of the greenwashing information, not the specific product portrayed in the marketing messages. The study is interesting and valuable, it is important to note the final remark about brand association versus specific product marketing. Specifically, in the beauty industry, some brands are associated with clean beauty, and others that have products with clean claims, but as a whole do not consider their brand identity as a "clean brand". These nuances are used to

a companies advantage when marketing a product, as shown in the study above if a brand develops a clean identity, there is less skepticism on whether each product is clean. This is all valuable information in understanding consumer behavior, but to understand why a consumer makes a clean purchase- specifically, beauty related one- it is imperative to gauge their level of comprehension when it comes to the language being used. There will be nuances in defining green terms amongst the companies themselves, so there must be nuances between the understanding of the consumers.

A study was done in 2016 "Consumer Perceptions of Greenwashing: Understanding Awareness, Trust, and Effectiveness" attempted to understand how education levels, income, age, gender, level of environmentalism, and political affiliation aid in identifying greenwashing and being a green skeptic. The participants were given one of four shampoo bottles that had different certifications. One bottle had nothing (the control) one had a "no CFCs' label, another a recycling label, and finally, the last one had a "green label". The results were interesting, "seeing any environmental label made participants' suspicious of greenwashing. The green label is different showed different results from the other two. People who had that label thought that level of greenwashing was the most problematic and also thought it was more of a case of greenwashing than participants' who were assigned the other two labels. As far as the results regarding how much influence the level of environmentalism the participant claimed to live at, the findings were that varying levels of environmentalism didn't mean participants had higher or lower perceptions of product sustainability depending on which level they were. However, the interaction effect of the labels by environmentalism is more complex. The labels were less effective for high levels of environmentalism in participants. This was true for the no CFC label

and the green label, but especially for the bottle with the recycling label. (Halverson, 2018). I found this study to be the most informative in terms of deciphering how several variables to aid in the understanding of greenwashing and green skepticism. This thesis inspired me to think about how if I were to design an experiment, I would examine more than just the variable of comprehension, but rather also gender, age, and level of environmentalism. All of those variables give more insight on the consumer, and perhaps contextualist exactly who the informed demographic is. Approaching research with those values in conjunction with a focused analysis tailored to specifically comprehend consumer intelligence on environmentalism and scientific terminology would give great insight into the quest to call out greenwashing and promote actual environmentally-conscious practices.

 Research Question

The research question is two-fold, one will inform the other. First off, What is the average consumer knowledge in understanding environmentally charged vocabulary such as "clean" or "green", and how does this affect consumer behavior? And then, how do consumers use imagery, marketing tactics, and language available to them on a product or advertisement to decide on whether a product or brand is environmentally friendly? I am asking these questions together because it is important to know the base knowledge of a consumer to see at what level they rely on marketing/branding when they are deciding to purchase a product. This question is focused on micro-level consumerist behavior. (micro-economics).

<u>Hypothesis</u>

If the consumer has a high level of understanding when it comes to environmental and scientific vocabulary and not only relying on marketing, then they will be more skeptical of a clean beauty product and thus less inclined to purchase it, because they are aware of what constitutes as sustainable/environmentally friendly, and are making an informed decision. If a consumer has a low level of understanding when it comes to environmental and scientific vocabulary, then they will buy into marketing tools to make a decision and will not be as skeptical of a clean beauty product and thus be more inclined to purchase it because they are not aware of what it means to be sustainable/environmentally friendly.

<u>Methodology</u>

To test the hypothesis, I would begin by doing extensive research on marketing tactics used by non-clean products and brands versus clean ones. I would choose a specific product that is common amongst many beauty brands, such as mascara. One can do surface-level research using information available on the Sephora website and other cosmetic analysis websites, but I would take this further by requesting the knowledge of a chemist who understands product ingredients to better the scope of my research. Ideally, if consumer reports are available from Sephora (I have not found any) I would choose the most popular mascara and compare branding and marketing to their clean at Sephora counterparts. Since many cosmetic companies do not disclose anything on their sustainable practice beyond using vegan or clean ingredients, reaching out directly would be the best way to gather information. The comparative analysis would look at imagery, text, branding, phrasing, language, etc for each product and then contextualize the

product in terms of where it fits in the brand identity. Some surface-level research has brought me to the following conclusions: as seen in figure 1, clean beauty brands seem to use less visible, traditional glam makeup on the models, making sure to show the texture of the skin and any freckles/imperfections. On the other hand, in figure 2, a model is seen sporting visible makeup and smooth retouched skin. These visible differences inform the consumer of the brand they are going to support. That research is not enough to understand consumer behavior, the next step would be to gauge the level of knowledge in which a consumer has.

To understand what consumers know about product labels, I would conduct a survey where I would ask the participants to define words such as "vegan", "organic", "non-toxic" "clean", "green", "natural", "cruelty-free" "parabens", "fragrance/fragrance-free", and more which I will find through the first stage of research. The survey would also include a basic ingredient list of common ingredients and the participant would identify the ones they knew. If nothing is known, the participant has the option to mark "I don't know". The survey would be sent out to a large number of people of various ages, gender identities, and academic backgrounds. Once the results are in, the next steps would be to find commonalities, trends, etc and form conclusions on who seems to know what.

After the collection of that data, a group of survey participants would be chosen at random for the next phase, I would be making sure to include those who seemed to know a lot and those who knew very little. The participants would enter a simulation where they will be asked to purchase a few beauty products. The beauty products would be presented on a simple display that included brand imagery and advertisements. After choosing their products, the

participants would be asked why they made those choices, what variables informed their decisions, and if they are content with their choices.

Finally, once all data is collected, it would be analyzed and visualized in different charts and graphs that show the relationship between the variables such as age, gender identity, consumer knowledge, products chosen, and academic backgrounds.

Presenting the Research and Results

Once the study would be complete, ideally, it would help gauge the relationship between environmental/ingredient knowledge and the effect of marketing and branding on the consumer on identifying greenwashing. The purpose of this study is to inform the public about the ambiguity of language especially in terms of the clean beauty industry, and I do not intend for brands to use this information as the basis of marketing standards that harm the environment and capitalize on consumers ignorance. Deceitful marketing tactics are not "clean" practices and do not aid in helping the environment, but rather put more garbage in our landfills and oceans. Transparency is sustainable. Beauty brands should use this as a tool to improve their communication with the consumer, and not just offer a stamp of approval, but actual concrete evidence that there is an effort to be sustainable. Ingredient transparency is not the only variable that makes a brand green, but it is important for the consumer to understand exactly what they are buying, and is a solid step towards conscious consumerism, which in turn has positive effects on the environment. This study is meant to spark green skepticism and push for consumers to research what they are purchasing and whom they are purchasing from. Awareness is the first step in positive change.

<u>Future applications</u>

 The future of this proposed study is that it would be forever evolving since formulas and new ingredients and sources are being developed constantly. A study like this should be done every few years to gauge the understanding of the consumer and call out brands who use ignorance to their advantage. The more light that is shed on consumer knowledge the better. In a perfect world, once the FDA finally agrees to pass the bill that would expose clean beauty practices, the consumer should not be appalled at their behavior, but will ideally have developed a skill to identify greenwashing, and will not be guilty of committing involuntary environmental damage.

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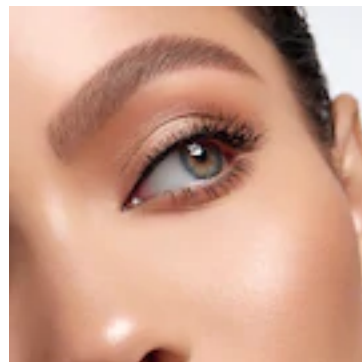
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Figures

1. Ilia limitless mascara ad

2. Anastasia Beverly Hills Mascara ad