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RESEARCH ARTICLE

BRIDGING THE GREEN PURCHASING GAP: ANALYSING CONSUMER PERCEPTION, BRAND AWARENESS, SOCIAL INFLUENCE, AND ACTUAL BUYING BEHAVIOUR FOR NATURAL AND SUSTAINABLE PERSONAL CARE PRODUCTS

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Abstract

The “green purchasing gap” describes the disconnect between consumers’ intentions to purchase eco-friendly personal care products and their actual buying behaviour. This paper examines key psychological, social, and marketing drivers behind this gap, with particular emphasis on the often-overlooked role of brand awareness. Using a mixed-methods approach that combines a quantitative survey of 2,000 consumers with 30 in-depth interviews, this study finds that although 78% of participants express intent to purchase sustainable personal care products, only 29% do so consistently. Barriers such as price sensitivity, skepticism about green claims, insufficient brand awareness, and inconsistent social influence were prominent. The paper recommends multi-pronged marketing strategies including educational awareness, influencer partnerships, transparent labeling, and enhance brand visibility to convert eco-conscious intent into genuine consumer behavior & change in perception.

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Introduction:-

The global surge in environmental awareness has reshaped consumer expectations within the personal care industry, driving demand for natural, organic, and sustainable products. Despite increasing claims of eco-conscious attitudes, a prominent “green purchasing gap” remains: a significant disparity between favourable attitudes or intentions toward green products and actual purchasing behavior. While prior research has largely focused on factors such as price, product efficacy concerns, and social influence, brand awareness has emerged as an equally crucial but underexplored barrier to closing this gap. Consumers’ low brand recall and understanding of sustainable personal care brands complicate decision-making and reduce purchase likelihood—even when intentions are positive. This research aims to systematically analyze these factors and identify actionable insights to bridge this behavioral gap.

Literature Review:-

The green purchasing gap is documented extensively in consumer behaviour literature, typically framed within the Theory of Planned Behaviour, which links attitudes, subjective norms, and perceived behavioural control to intention and behavior. However, intentions rarely convert to consistent purchase due to various economic and cognitive barriers. Recent studies emphasize the role of social influence through peer and influencer marketing,

significantly shaping consumer attitudes and trust in green products. Effective communication of verified product benefits and environmental credentials encourages purchase, yet “greenwashing” concerns inhibit trust and increase skepticism. An emerging body of research highlights brand awareness as a vital but overlooked factor; sustainable personal care brands often lack market visibility and consumer familiarity, leading to hesitation and category abandonment. Without clear differentiation of green offerings, consumers opt for trusted, conventional brands despite their stated ecological preference.

Methodology:-

Study Design and Sample:-

A mixed-methods approach was employed, combining quantitative and qualitative components. A cross-sectional online survey of 2,000 Indian adults aged 18 to 54 (58% female, 42% male) from both urban and semi-urban areas was conducted. Additionally, 30 semi-structured qualitative interviews were carried out with a purposive subsample of green personal care product users and non-users.

Measures:-

Variables measured included:

- Environmental attitude and awareness
- Brand awareness (aided and unaided recall of green personal care brands)
- Price sensitivity
- Trust in green product claims
- Social influence metrics (peer recommendations, influencer followership)
- Actual purchase behavior in the past six months.

Data Analysis:-

Quantitative data were analyzed using regression analysis and structural equation modeling (SEM) to assess relationships between variables. Qualitative data were content-analyzed thematically to contextualize consumer reasoning and decision-making processes.

Results:-

Participant Profile

Demographic	Percentage (%)
Female	58
Male	42
Age 18-34	55
Age 35-54	45

Intention and Behavior Metrics:-

- 78% of respondents expressed intention to purchase sustainable personal care products.
- Only 29% reported consistent purchases of natural or eco-friendly products in the preceding six months.
- Unaided brand recall was low: only 41% could name more than two green personal care brands.

Barriers to Green Purchasing:-

Barrier	Percentage (%) Reporting Barrier
Price premium	62
Product efficacy skepticism	57
Distrust in green claims	42
Inconvenience/availability	38
Lack of peer recommendation	35
Lack of brand awareness	34

Role of Social Influence and Brand Awareness:-

Most green brand discovery occurred through digital channels and word-of-mouth. Interviewees highlighted confusion caused by undifferentiated products and superficial green claims, which undermined brand credibility and purchase confidence. Consumers heavily reliant on social media influencers emphasized the need for authentic and transparent messaging.

Results and Discussion: -**Participant Profile: -**

The survey sample comprised 2,000 respondents representative of urban and semi-urban populations in the target geographic area. Females accounted for 58%, and males 42%, with the majority (55%) falling in the 18-34 age bracket. This demographic balance supports generalizability to the broader consumer base for personal care products.

The Green Purchasing Gap: Intention vs. Behavior: -

Findings reveal a clear green purchasing gap: 78% of respondents expressed a strong intention to buy natural and sustainable personal care products, yet only 29% had consistently purchased such products in the past six months. This corroborates prior research indicating that while consumer awareness and concern about sustainability have grown substantially, actual behavior change lags behind. This gap underscores the complex interplay between consumer values and real-world constraints.

Key Barriers to Bridging the Gap: -

Respondents identified multiple barriers to purchase (see Table 1). Price premium was the most frequently cited obstacle (62%), followed closely by skepticism about product efficacy (57%) and distrust of green claims (42%). Inconvenience or limited product availability was flagged by 38%, and lack of peer recommendations by 35%. Notably, 34% reported lack of brand awareness as a significant barrier, highlighting the crucial role of familiarity and trusted branding in purchase decisions.

Interpreting the Lack of Brand Awareness: -

The relatively high incidence of brand awareness as a purchase barrier reveals a critical insight: well-intentioned consumers are often unaware of credible, sustainable personal care brands or struggle to differentiate them from less authentic competitors. This aligns with emerging literature that positions brand awareness not only as a marketing goal but a prerequisite for green purchasing adoption. Low brand recognition compounds consumer skepticism and reduces confidence, thereby limiting conversion of green intentions into actual sales.

Social Influence and Discovery Channels: -

The data show consumers predominantly discover green personal care brands via social media influencers and peer word-of-mouth, confirming the rising influence of digital channels in shaping eco-consumer behavior. However,

interviews revealed that influencer authenticity and transparent communication significantly affect this influence. Consumers expressed wariness when confronted with seemingly inauthentic or over-commercialized endorsements, reinforcing prior findings on the need for credible social proof. Marketing effectiveness in this domain thus depends on building genuine relationships between brands and communities to foster trust, which resonates with Ajzen's (1991) framework emphasizing subjective norms in behavioral intention.

Integrating Findings with Theory and Practice: -

The findings substantiate the Theory of Planned Behavior's core premise that while positive attitudes and social norms encourage green intentions, perceived behavioral control—here reflected in practical barriers like brand awareness and price—plays a determinative role in predicting actual purchase behavior. Moreover, the data highlight areas for intervention. Efforts to amplify brand visibility, improve labeling transparency, and educate consumers can strengthen perceived behavioral control and reduce uncertainty. Additionally, fostering authentic social influence appears critical to converting intention into action.

Unexpected Findings and Limitations: -

Contrary to some prior studies emphasizing socio-demographic predictors, no significant variation was observed in the green purchasing gap across age or gender groups in this sample, suggesting that awareness and market factors may override demographic effects in this context. Future research might explore longitudinal behavior or cultural influences more comprehensively. Limitations include reliance on self-reported data, which may introduce social desirability bias, and the geographic focus, which may affect global applicability. However, the mixed-methods approach and robust sample size strengthen validity and provide rich consumer insight.

Conclusion and Recommendations: -

Conclusion:-

This study confirms the existence of a substantial green purchasing gap in the natural and sustainable personal care category. While the majority of consumers express strong pro-environmental attitudes and intentions to purchase green products, only a minority consistently convert these intentions into actual behavior. Key findings highlight that, beyond well-documented barriers like price sensitivity and skepticism toward green claims, lack of brand awareness is a critical but often underappreciated obstacle. Consumers frequently struggle to identify and differentiate credible green personal care brands in a crowded and sometimes misleading marketplace. This confusion diminishes trust and reduces the likelihood of switching to sustainable alternatives. Social influence, particularly through digital platforms and trusted influencers, plays a pivotal role in bridging this gap but requires authenticity and transparency to be effective. Together, these findings underscore the need for an integrated approach that targets psychological, social, and structural factors in unison to effectively narrow the green purchasing gap in personal care products.

Recommendations: -

Based on the empirical evidence and literature synthesis, the following actionable recommendations are proposed for marketers, policymakers, and researchers:

- **Enhance Brand Awareness:**
Invest in targeted marketing campaigns to increase clear, consistent brand recognition of sustainable personal care products. Use a mix of traditional advertising and digital platforms to improve unaided recall and familiarity.
- **Promote Transparent Communication:**
Establish strong third-party certifications and transparent ingredient disclosures that resonate with consumers to combat skepticism and build lasting trust.
- **Leverage Influencer Partnerships:**
Collaborate with credible social media influencers and digital communities who align authentically with sustainability values to amplify trustworthy word-of-mouth and social proof.
- **Educate Consumers:**
Implement educational initiatives both online and offline to improve consumer understanding of the benefits, efficacy, and environmental impact of green personal care products.
- **Address Price Barriers:**
Explore pricing strategies, such as promotions, loyalty programs, and tiered offerings, to make natural and sustainable products more accessible, especially to price-sensitive consumers.

- **Facilitate Product Trial and Visibility:**

Increase in-store sampling, availability in mainstream retail channels, and visibility in e-commerce platforms to reduce entry barriers and increase trial purchases.

- **Encourage Future Research:**

Promote interdisciplinary studies integrating consumer psychology, digital marketing, and sustainability science to better understand and influence green purchasing behavior longitudinally.

The pathway to closing the green purchasing gap is complex but tractable. By prioritizing brand awareness, trust-building, and social engagement alongside affordability and accessibility, stakeholders can catalyse genuine and sustained growth of the green personal care market.

Conflicts of Interest: -

The authors declare no conflicts of interest related to this work.

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