

A Work Project, presented as part of the requirements for the Award of a Master's degree in Management from the Nova School of Business and Economics.

**Ethical consumption and brand detachment in the cosmetic sector:
A study of Italian consumers' perception**

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Abstract

In the past decade, the cosmetic market has become the focus of attention for its practices not always deemed ethical and sustainable. Indeed, this research aims at investigating the role of Italian consumers' ethical behavior on brand detachment in the cosmetic sector, focusing on brands using chemical ingredients and testing on animals. Such relationships were further examined with the introduction of brand attitude as a moderator. A quantitative analysis has been adopted to test the hypotheses and an online questionnaire has been distributed, through which 310 Italian consumers were surveyed. The findings highlighted the influence of ethical consumer behavior on brand detachment, thus implying the impending need for cosmetic companies to consider their environmental and social impact, as this could accordingly affect consumer attachment to the brand. Still, no significant interaction effect has been identified when including brand attitude in the correlation.

Keywords: Consumer Behavior, Ethical Consumerism, Green Consumerism, Animal Testing.

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1. Introduction

In an era in which social and environmental protection are becoming key urgencies globally, ethical consumption is rapidly evolving and, along with it, the progressing positive perception of consumers towards brands promoting transparent and sustainable practices. As a consequence, the cosmetic market has attracted a particular spotlight due to their debatable processes and many brands have been subject to severe judgments and critics.

Nowadays, the cosmetic industry has developed and grown into one of the fastest moving and most profitable sectors, as a result of increased consumer interest in body care products. Indeed, cosmetics became part of the daily routine of an increasing number of consumers who want to improve their appearance and, at the same time, follow the trends that fashion dictates (Aziz & Ngah, 2019). More specifically, according to Statista (2020), in Italy the cosmetic market represents one of the foremost cosmetic industries internationally, gaining the tenth place among its global competitors. Besides the Italian domestic market, which accounts for the majority of sales, also their export of products worldwide has undoubtedly increased in the last few years (Statista, 2020). As a result of the rising consumer demand, an increasing number of companies started penetrating the cosmetic market, thus leading to a very competitive environment.

As the market has developed, so has the sense of responsibility of buyers who, more than ever, are becoming aware of the social and environmental problems caused by the cosmetic industry. Consumers are becoming more and more attentive to sustainability and ethical issues on every facet of their daily lives and, as such, also on their cosmetic purchases (Amberg & Fogarassy, 2019). Indeed, the beauty industry is among the most criticized for its methods, such as the use of environmentally harmful ingredients, the use of plastic packaging, testing on animals, and the exploitation of workforces. Although these factors are often critical during consumers' decision-making process, the offer of fully sustainable products is still limited. In

such a competitive market, a brand's approach to corporate social responsibility could be an important driver for choosing one brand over another, thus making it crucial to consider the risks that could arise in terms of brand detachment towards cosmetic brands that choose not to adopt, or only partially adopt ethical practices.

Despite ethical consumption influence on consumers' behavior being the research subject of many recent studies, a gap in the literature has been identified around the cosmetic sector, thus indicating the need for a thorough study to address this issue. Considering this, the purpose of the current paper is, indeed, to investigate the impact of consumers' ethical behavior on brand detachment in the cosmetic sector, thus examining a possible correlation between these variables. Given the relevant position of the Italian cosmetic market, the research will be focusing specifically on Italian consumers' perception on the matter and to narrow the area of study, two main concepts of ethical consumption will be taken into consideration: green consumerism and animal testing.

The paper has been structured as follows. Firstly, an overview of the literature will be conducted, exploring in-depth the concepts of ethical consumerism, green consumerism, and animal testing, and analyzing findings on the topics from previous research. Based on this, the hypotheses and conceptual model will be outlined. An extended description of the methodology and the framework of the research methods used to undertake this study will then be performed. Subsequently, the result of the analysis will be defined and will later be analyzed in the discussion stage, where the data will be applied to the previously raised hypotheses in order to highlight the managerial implications and the future research opportunities for this topic.

2. Literature Review

In order to contextualize the research and provide a broad perspective of the phenomenon, an analysis on previous findings on ethical consumerism, green consumerism and animal testing has been carried out, aiming at studying the impact of these factors on the

cosmetic industry. As a result of prior academic research on the subject, hypotheses related to the previously presented research question will be outlined.

2.1 Ethical Consumerism

“Ethical consumerism refers to buyer behavior that reflects a concern with the problems that arise from unethical and unjust global trades, such as child and low-paid labor, infringement of human rights, animal testing, labor union suppressions, inequalities in trading relations with the Third World and pollution of the environment” (Lee, 2008; p. 575). Accordingly, ethical consumers are individuals who are knowledgeable of environmental impact and are extremely sensitive to ethical issues and, therefore, are willing to purchase products that seek to minimize social and environmental damage (Pervin et al., 2014). A multitude of moral considerations have an effect on each individual's daily consumption habits. Under these circumstances, consumers might be willing to compromise products' quality or price for fairly traded or environmentally friendly products, in order to support social and environmental causes and eventually leading to boycott unethical brands and products (Szmigin et al., 2009).

As a result, consumers have begun to look into the manufacturing, distribution, and resourcing of goods, since the rise of ethical consumerism in the mid-1990s (Lee, 2008). Although being an old phenomenon, in recent years ethical consumerism has taken a major role in consumers' minds, thus evolving from being solely a niche market. According to a study conducted in 2007 by the Financial Times, around one-third of consumers in five countries would be actually willing to spend more to purchase ethically produced products (Sheehan & Lee, 2014). The rise of ethical consumerism represents a growing segment of society that opposes to mindless consumerism at all costs: customers are interested in learning more about the effects that products have on the environment, as well as on their physical well-being. Not only consumers are becoming more environmentally mindful and socially concerned, but also

more conscious of their power when it comes to making ethical buying choices and believe their decisions can actually make a difference (Alaouir et al., 2019).

In previous studies, factors motivating consumer purchase of ethically produced products have been analyzed. According to Davies and Gutsche (2016), several value-based factors and a single non-value-based factor influence consumers' ethical consumption. The value-based factors, accordingly healthy and safety, social shame, and self-satisfaction, suggest that the consumers carefully consider their choices during the decision-making stage and act following the core values they hold, while the non-value-based factor, being habit, denotes an action solely based on instinct, without giving much thought to the selection of the product (Alaouir et al., 2019).

Further research showed that consumer attitudes toward ethical consumption were positively linked to ethical obligation, self-identity, and altruism, thus indicating that the personal or ethical ideals one associates with ethical consumption had a significant positive impact on one's attitude toward ethical consumption (Oh & Yoon, 2014). Knowledge is also a key factor when considering ethical consumption: consumers must be properly informed in order to make ethical decisions. However, there is still contradictory research on customers' propensities to accept or oppose to corporations' ethical and unethical actions. Indeed, according to previously conducted studies, being aware of environmental and social issues affects individuals' behavior unsymmetrically, not always being a good enough reason to boycott unethical companies (Carrigan & Attalla, 2001).

On the other hand, it has been previously demonstrated that ethical brand perception has a strong influence on brand attachment and loyalty. Consumer-perceived ethicality aids brands in developing a strong and attractive image, which contributes to positive feelings about the brand (Garanti, 2019). According to Singh et al. (2012), consumer perceived ethicality not only positively impacts brand loyalty and attachment, but also encourages customer engagement,

future sales, and word-of-mouth referrals, making it a compelling argument for companies to encourage ethical conduct. At the same time, an attitude-behavior gap has been identified: what appears to be emerging is that, while customers show a desire to make ethical purchases, social responsibility does not happen to be the most important factor in their purchasing decision (Carrigan & Attalla, 2001). Several reasons for this behavior have been identified such as a lack of accessibility to ethical products, lack of comprehensive marketing communications that promote ethical products, or the fact that customers are often deceived by company claims and "greenwash" (Pervin et al., 2014).

Nonetheless, in response to the growing emphasis on ethical issues in consumption, brands have begun to portray themselves as environmentally and socially responsible. Companies are more concerned with fostering corporate responsibility, given the growing influence of ethical concerns on customer behavior. Morality has become a major determinant for corporate brands, and a growing number of businesses are using such aspect to define and promote their products (Singh et al., 2012). More specifically, the cosmetics industry is one of the most contentious industries in terms of sustainability: purchasing cosmetics has entailed a slew of issues that are both cultural and ethical, including environmental and animal welfare concerns. From previous research, it has been demonstrated that protecting animal welfare is considered the most relevant ethical consideration when referring to cosmetic products, taking precedence over environmental issues and human rights concerns (Pervin et al., 2014). Aside from the ethical concern of avoiding goods that have been tested on animals though, certain customers will weight other considerations when purchasing cosmetics, such as natural ingredients or sustainable packaging (Pervin et al., 2014).

As a result, due to the increase of consumers' approach toward healthy lifestyles and demands for natural cosmetics, the industry has significantly diversified its managerial and marketing strategy in order to satisfy customers' needs (Baldemir & Kaya, 2010). Indeed, such

worries have prompted producers to reposition old products and launch new more sustainable ones, thus assisting in the growth of a more ethical and environment-friendly cosmetics industry.

Therefore, as a consequence of previous findings, the author developed the following hypotheses, to test the impact of ethical consumer behavior on both companies using chemical ingredients and companies testing on animals:

H1: Ethical consumer behavior has a positive impact on brand detachment towards cosmetic brands using chemical ingredients.

H2: Ethical consumer behavior has a positive impact on brand detachment towards cosmetic brands testing on animals.

2.2 Green Consumerism

In recent years, societal concern about the ecosystem has grown and the concept of "green consumption" has gotten particular consideration because of its environmental effects (Jaini et al., 2019). Individuals' attention began to focus on "green" and "environment-friendly" products, therefore indicating an increasing consumption of goods produced and perfected in accordance with environmental requirements. These present several benefits, including the use of less water, materials, and electricity during processing, being non-or mildly polluting to natural resources and offering recyclable packaging. (Amberg & Fogarassy, 2019). This trend led to a social and cultural shift, instilling a sense of environmental and personal responsibility to buyers that are increasingly more aware of their purchases (Kapoor et al., 2019). Indeed, consumers are important contributors to the accomplishment of environmental development goals thanks to their opportunity to choose between environmentally harmful and eco-friendly goods and services (Akhtar et al., 2021).

Despite the growing interest in green consumption, the factors that influence customer attitudes and behavior toward such goods have yet to be fully identified in the literature and are therefore still being investigated. Schuitema and de Groot (2014) have referred to green

consumerism as a “social dilemma”, and therefore a scenario where consumers’ interests, such as price or quality, clash with their collective interests, in this case, environmental protection. In a social dilemma situation, values deeply influence consumers' purchase behavior, thus making them essential determinants of green consumerism. Values are general predictors of behaviors, desires and actions, since they represent expectations about the desirability of a specific end-state (Schuitema & de Groot, 2014). More specifically, egoistic values, reflecting mainly personal interests, and altruistic values, representing emotions or worries regarding the environment, are the most critical ones to take into consideration for research purposes in this context (Jaini et al., 2019). According to Schuitema and de Groot (2014) findings, green product attributes have a very strong impact on buying intentions: both in the case of consumers' egoistic motives being satisfied or not, green product attributes still turned out to severely influence purchasing decisions. Moreover, according to Akhtar et al (2021), consumers' environmental ethics, moral obligations, and green attitude have a strong effect on consumers’ disposition to buy green goods, which in turn influences their green consumption. Awareness is also a key factor when it comes to green purchase intentions: with the rise of consciousness of environmental issues, there has been an increased disposition towards green products and a decline in the use of environmentally damaging products (Liobikiene & Bernatoniene, 2017).

Public support for environmentally friendly products has resulted in a significant rise in both the amount of these kinds of products marketed and the sales increase seen by such brands, thus encouraging firms to be more environmentally conscious and to have a wider green product range to meet the demands of these new customers (Pop et al., 2020).

One of the sectors most affected by this trend has been the cosmetics industry: due to cosmetics and body care products being commonly used in large quantities, their continuous consumption leads to very damaging effects on the environment (Amberg & Fogarassy, 2019). Additionally, containing significant quantities of chemical additives, these products result

extremely harmful to both the environment and the individuals who use them regularly (Csorba & Boglea, 2011), resulting in the banning of a vast number of beauty products around the world due to the use of toxic compounds such as triphenyl phosphate, petroleum, and propylparaben (Jaini et al., 2019). As a result, demand for green products has begun to grow exponentially, also caused by a general concern about issues related to animal welfare, hygiene, and health (Kapoor et al., 2019), recording an increase of 20% per year and representing almost 30% of the total cosmetic sales in 2015 (Liobikiene & Bernatoniene, 2017). Green cosmetics are defined as products shaped to preserve the environment, through the use of natural components that can be recycled, and minimize pollution, while ensuring animal welfare and species protection (Lin et al., 2018). As a result, green cosmetics guarantee environmental protection during the whole manufacturing process and the use of natural resources for improved health conditions (Liobikiene & Bernatoniene, 2017).

In Europe, the cosmetic industry is particularly conscious of environmental issues, thus establishing specific norms controlled by the Cosmetics Directive which regulates and supervises cosmetics products and ingredients used, focusing on the potential environmental effects these could lead to (Pervin et al., 2014). At the same time, through the COMOS certification, which became effective in Europe in 2011, it is checked and validated that the sustainability standards of cosmetic products are complied with (Lin et al., 2018). However, due to the only recent emergence of such products, certifications are often restricted and not always clear to consumers, thus leading buyers' preferences to be swayed by marketing techniques and appealing advertisements (Lin et al., 2018). Misleading environmental claims made by certain companies to attract consumers are deeply impacting companies producing genuine green cosmetics, fostering consumers' mistrust towards sustainable product claims in general (Borin et al., 2011). Although many brands clearly state their green attributes, due to a lack of legislation that clearly defines green standards and terms, this information is often

confused or misunderstood by potential buyers. In this regard, significant importance is given to symbols and logos in order to provide environmental information regarding a product. Nevertheless, evidence shows that consumers often struggle to grasp what the labels, or terms such as “eco-friendly”, are attempting to convey (Borin et al., 2011). Furthermore, the vast number of symbols/labels makes it more difficult for consumers to compare the benefits of different brands (Borin et al., 2011). This demonstrates a clear distrust of consumers towards buying green cosmetics due to a lack of clear regulations and makes it necessary for companies to provide accurate information on green cosmetics attributes and the health and environmental benefits they support (Kapoor et al., 2019).

Based on previous findings, three clusters of consumers can be developed based on behavioral attitude towards cosmetic products, indicating variations in customer sentiment, which are likely due to a variety of external reasons (Amberg & Fogarassy, 2019). The first cluster of consumers relies regularly on green consumption, the second focuses on consumers still purchasing mostly chemical-containing products while the third addresses a group of consumers with mixed behavior, therefore consuming both kinds of products (Amberg & Fogarassy, 2019). The decision-making process and consumer attitudes are often influenced by the knowledge of the environment (Paul et al., 2016) and of green cosmetic products: according to previous research, consumers with sufficient knowledge of green cosmetics had strong favorable views toward them, therefore, demonstrating that increasing environmental knowledge is more likely to positively influence individuals' behavior towards green products (Lin et al., 2018). However, consumers with high green consciousness, and therefore acknowledging green cosmetics standards, are few, while the majority are often not able to recognize them (Lin et al., 2018). According to Lin et al (2018), many are not even able to give a precise definition of green cosmetics, demonstrating a lack of sufficient knowledge on the topic. Moreover, consumers are often discouraged from purchasing such products because of

the higher price and seemingly inferior quality compared to equivalent products (Borin et al., 2011). There is a discrepancy between customer awareness and the current state of the green cosmetics industry, which led many consumers to adopt a neutral stance on the matter (Lin et al., 2018). Either way, consumer behavior has changed dramatically, with environmental and health consciousness playing an increasingly important role in consumers' choices.

Accordingly, taking into consideration what previously stated by several research papers, the following hypothesis was developed, attributing to brand attitude towards green cosmetics the role of the moderator between ethical consumption and brand detachment towards brands using chemical ingredients.

H3: The impact of ethical consumer behavior on brand detachment towards cosmetic brands that use chemical ingredients increases with positive brand attitude towards green cosmetic brands.

2.3. Animal Testing

Animal welfare has evolved as an extremely researched area of study in the past two decades, with social sciences playing a key role in deepening our understanding of how ethical concerns can be translated into improved animal welfare (van Riemsdijk et al., 2017). More specifically, animal testing is widely debated in relation to cosmetics: despite being primarily experimented on plant tissues, for many beauty companies testing cosmetics on animals still is a common practice. (Baldemir & Kaya, 2010). In addition to animal exploitation, this practice also has a serious environmental impact: animals' carcasses used for these experiments are discarded, often contaminated by toxic and dangerous substances, thus posing a serious risk in terms of pollution (Alaouir et al., 2019). Many separate players, such as politicians, industry experts, and, most notably, individual customers, are putting pressure on cosmetic producers to engage in new approaches for research (Alaouir et al., 2019). In this regard, consumer behavior during the decisions-making process can have a significant impact on an actual improvement

on animal welfare all along the production line, as well as representing a significant barrier for the production of cosmetics that still adopt this unethical practice (van Riemsdijk et al., 2017).

As of recently, severe regulations and prohibitions on animal experimentation in cosmetics manufacturing have been established in several countries to ensure progress in the cosmetics industry. The European Union has prohibited animal testing within its borders starting from March 2013, as well as the import of all cosmetics previously tested on animals in foreign countries (Ap, 2018). At the same time, cosmetic companies selling in Europe can still decide to carry out this practice while selling animal-tested products only outside the European Union. On the other hand, due to the lack of proper legislation and precise guidelines, in the United States most cosmetics need to be tested on animals in order to be validated according to the standards set by the Food and Drug Administration (FDA) (Sheehan & Lee, 2014). Yet, this is different in China, where the use of this testing practice is explicitly required by the law in order to be able to sell beauty products. Cosmetic companies were forced to make a decision on whether or not to penetrate the Asian market, following the government regulations requiring animal testing on imported products, which went into effect in 2012 (Ap, 2018). Being the second-largest market for cosmetics and body care products on a global scale, several big players decided to subjugate to Chinese legislation on the topic, therefore allowing Chinese research laboratories to conduct such testing on their products (Ap, 2018). On the contrary, others have decided to remain true to their ethical beliefs and values, thus avoiding retail in China but rather taking advantage of the large wave of Asian tourists overseas.

In order to refer to a category of products that do not practice tests on animals, the term "cruelty-free" has become of general use. From previous findings it has been determined that the term has a moral heuristic function and, therefore, it often works as an indicator for the ethicality of a product, thus driving the consumer towards a specific purchase (Sheehan & Lee, 2014). Indeed, in consumers' minds, this expression is usually used to refer to cosmetic

products manufactured without hurting or killing any human being (Alaouir et al., 2019). Nevertheless, this term currently does not have a legal definition and its meaning differs a lot from country to country and according to the category of products. This resulted in several cosmetics being described as “cruelty-free” although either being tested on animals by a third party hired by the company or using additives that were previously tested on animals (Sheehan & Lee, 2014). The expression “cruelty-free” can be easily used by companies for marketing purposes, thus focusing on attracting consumers who do not know all the facets of the term. This proves that moral heuristic can also be easily misinterpreted when not clearly defined, resulting in consumers making inaccurate and unethical decisions (Sheehan & Lee, 2014). Nevertheless, in order to ensure that a product has not been tested on animals, some certifications have been designed and can be easily recognizable on products through symbols and logos. The only internationally recognized certification is the “Leaping Bunny Program”, in force since 1996, that guarantees the comprehensive ethicality of companies in terms of animal welfare (Leaping Bunny Program, 2021). The brands that managed to receive such certification are clearly identifiable by the Leaping Bunny logo on their products.

As a consequence, beauty companies are increasingly taking a stand on this topic to demonstrate their environmental stewardship and promote ethical consumption. Recently, concern about the exploitation of animals during the production of cosmetic products has grown a lot, especially among younger consumers. Thanks to the internet and the persistent contribution of organizations such as PETA, this practice is becoming increasingly frowned upon.

Although this topic presents opportunities for further investigation, very few studies on consumer perceptions of cruelty-free products have been conducted. According to Sheehan and Lee (2014), consumers who firmly believe in the importance of upholding animal welfare and oppose to any kind of animal experimentation tend to mature positive brand attitudes towards cruelty free brands. Moreover, it has been proven that positive brand attitude also has a direct

effect on consumer purchase intention towards cruelty-free cosmetic brands (Alaouir et al., 2019). This has also been supported by Kim and Chung (2011), that confirm the existence of such correlation between consumer attitude toward and behavioral intention when it comes to cosmetic products not tested on animals. On the other hand, despite consumers getting accustomed to the idea of cruelty-free makeup, according to previous findings it is clear that as much as this trend is evolving, financial factors persist being far more significant than ethical ones for consumer when purchasing cosmetic products (Alaouir et al., 2019). While for some consumers buying cruelty-free products may be considered a responsibility, or rather an ethical obligation, others tend to trade this factor off with attributes such as price (van Riemsdijk et al., 2017).

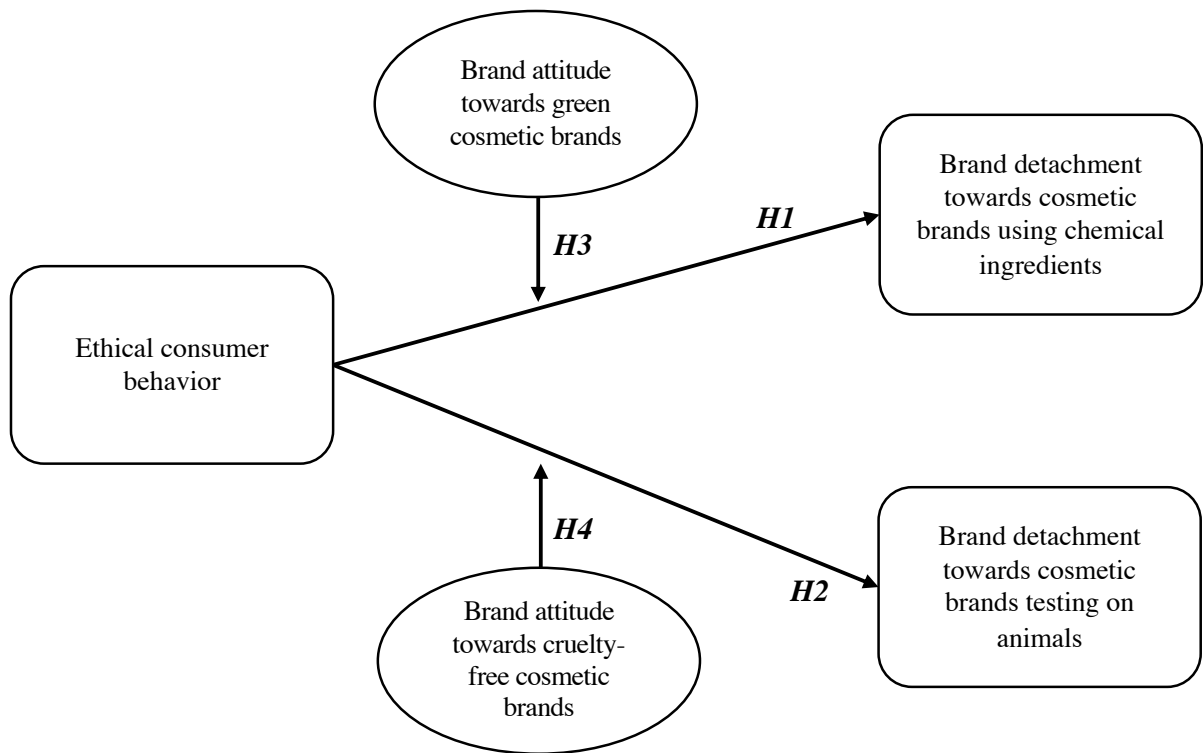
Based on these prior results, the following hypothesis was developed in order to test the effect of brand attitude as a moderator, on ethical consumer behavior's impact on companies that test on animals:

H4: The impact of ethical consumer behavior on brand detachment towards cosmetic brands that test on animals increases with positive brand attitude towards cruelty-free cosmetic brands.

2.4 Conceptual model

The conceptual model, illustrated in *Figure 1*, displays the variables that are going to be analyzed in the present research. Ethical consumer behavior, representing the independent variable, will be adopted to assess the impact on two dependent variables, accordingly brand detachment towards cosmetic brands using chemical ingredients (H1) and brand detachment towards cosmetic brands testing on animals (H2). Subsequently, two moderator variables, brands attitude towards green cosmetic brands (H3) and brand attitude towards cruelty-free cosmetic brands (H4), will be introduced onto the analysis to evaluate whether they impact in any way the relationship between the previously stated dependent and independent variables.

Figure 1. Conceptual Model



3. Method

The section aims at outlining the research methods that have been adopted to undertake the current study and respond to the previously posed research question.

3.1. Procedure and participants

The research method by means of which the study has been conducted is purely quantitative and focuses on measuring the impact of ethical consumer behavior on brand detachment of both cosmetic brands using chemical ingredients and cosmetic brands testing on animals. In order to develop a comprehensive understanding of consumers' behavior, two moderator variables have been introduced, accordingly brand attitude towards green cosmetic brands and brand attitude towards cruelty-free cosmetic brands. For the collection of data, a questionnaire in English was designed through Qualtrics, and later distributed using personal contacts and word-of-mouth. The research focused on the Italian population and, therefore, was distributed solely among individuals whose country of origin is Italy. Besides questions

concerning the purpose of the study, the questionnaire included queries regarding demographic information, and respectively gender, age group and country of origin.

A total of 344 filled questionnaires were gathered, however 34 participants were excluded from the analysis as they did not pertain to the target sample of Italian consumers. Indeed, 310 questionnaires were considered valid: 78% of the respondents were female and 19% were males, while the remaining 3% were either non-binary or preferred not to state their gender. Moreover, 44% of the sample belonged to the 41-60 age group, followed by the 18-25 age group recording a 33% of the total sample, 15% between 26-40 and 5% and 2% respectively for over 60 and under 18 age groups.

3.2. Measurement scales

To analyze the variables, scales endorsed in previous studies have been used and/or adapted to fit the aim of the study. In order to confirm internal consistency of each item and to ensure the scale's overall reliability, a Cronbach's alpha reliability test was conducted (*Appendix 2*).

A ten-item scale developed by Sudbury-Riley and Kohlbacher (2016) has been used to measure ethical consumer behavior. The scale has been adapted to a five-item scale to suit the research, with a sample item being "When there is a choice, I always choose the product that contributes to the least amount of environmental damage". Response ranged from 1 (strongly disagree) to 7 (strongly agree). The Cronbach alpha recorded for the scale is equal to 0.82.

Brand detachment was, instead, assessed through the six-item scale developed by Zarantonello and Pauwels-Delassus (2016). The scale has been adapted to a five-item scale, with a sample item being "I am no longer attracted by this brand". Response ranged from 1 (strongly disagree) to 7 (strongly agree). The Cronbach alpha for the scale is equal to 0.89 and 0.90, accordingly for brand detachment towards cosmetic brands using chemical ingredients and brand detachment towards cosmetics brands testing on animals.

Finally, a three-item scale by Pop et al. (2020) and a four-item scale by Chen and Deng (2016) have been adapted to develop a five-item scale to measure brand attitude. Sample items used are “For me, using green cosmetics is wise”, in the case of brand attitude towards green cosmetic products, and “I am willing to spend a little more money to buy cruelty-free products” to assess brand attitude towards cruelty-free cosmetic products. Also in this case, response options ranged from 1 (strongly disagree) to 7 (strongly agree). The average Cronbach’s alpha is 0.90 and 0.89, respectively for brand attitude towards green cosmetic products and brand attitude towards cruelty-free cosmetic products.

Cronbach’s alpha results confirmed the questionnaire’s reliability. The majority of the items proved to be worthy of retention, resulting in a decrease of the alpha value in case they were removed, with the exception of item “I am still interested by what these brand offers” in the scale used to measure brand detachment, that would respectively increase Cronbach’s alpha to 0.93 and 0.94 if deleted. Accordingly, exclusion of this item should be taken into consideration for further research.

4. Results

4.1. Model validity

The collected data was examined and interpreted using SPSS Statistics 27.0. In order to determine construct validity, the use of Pearson’s correlation was adopted, so as to test the linear association among the previously stated variables. As exhibited in *Table 1*, outcomes show a correlation between ethical consumer behavior and brand detachment towards cosmetic brands using chemical ingredients (H1), as well as brand detachment towards cosmetic brands testing on animals (H2), accordingly to Pearson’s $r = 0.428$, $p < .001$ and Pearson’s $r = 0.384$, $p < .001$. Additionally, also brand attitude towards green cosmetic products and brand attitude towards cruelty-free cosmetic brands present a positive correlation with, respectively, brand detachment towards cosmetic brands using chemical ingredients and brand detachment towards

cosmetic brands testing on animals. Indeed, the results displayed Pearson's $r = 0.467$, $p < .001$ and Pearson's $r = 0.613$, $p < .001$. Hence, the test revealed either moderate or strong correlations among the variables, thus proving the validity of the questionnaire.

Table 1. Construct validity: Pearson's correlation

Scales	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)	(5)
Ethical Consumer Behavior (1)	-				
Brand attitude towards green cosmetic brands (2)	.539**	-			
Brand attitude towards cruelty-free cosmetic brands (3)	.487**	0.685**	-		
Brand detachment towards cosmetic brands using chemical ingredients (4)	.428**	.467**	.427**	-	
Brand detachment towards cosmetic brands testing on animals (5)	.384**	.524**	.613**	.642**	-

** Correlation is significant at the .01 level (2-tailed)

4.2. Linear Regression

In order to estimate the affiliation among the previously stated variables, linear regression analysis have been conducted. Two separate tests have been carried out in order to measure the influence of the independent variable, i.e., ethical consumer behavior, on the dependent variables, accordingly brand detachment towards cosmetic brands using chemical ingredients (H1) and brand detachment towards cosmetic brands testing on animals (H2).

As shown in *Appendix 3* and *Appendix 4*, the results reported an R square of 0.183 for H1 and of 0.143 for H2, thus indicating that accordingly 18.3% and 14.3% of the variance in the dependent variables can be explained by the independent variable, ethical consumer behavior. The remaining 81.7% and 85.7% is described by outer factors not examined in this research.

In order to test the statistical significance of the outcome, the ANOVA table has been consulted. In such way, it has been possible to analyze the null hypothesis, i.e., assessing whether the independent variable reliably predicts the dependent variables. As displayed in

Appendix 5 and *Appendix 6*, the analysis reports results equal to $F(1, 308) = 68.892, p < .001$, in the case of brand detachments towards cosmetic brands using chemical ingredients, and equal to $F(1, 308) = 53.398, p < .001$, in the case of brand detachment towards cosmetic brands testing on animals. In both cases the significance is equal to $p > .001$ hence demonstrating that the predictor, ethical consumer behavior, is able to account for a significant amount of variance in brand detachment towards cosmetic brands using chemical ingredients and brand detachment towards cosmetic brands testing on animals. This establishes that the regression model is significant.

4.3. Moderation Regression

In order to evaluate the influence of the moderator variables, i.e., brand attitude towards green cosmetic brands and brand attitude towards cruelty-free cosmetic brands, on the impact between the independent and the dependent variables, a moderation regression with Model 1 of PROCESS macro has been conducted. Hayes' (2013) PROCESS macro is a modeling tool designed for SPSS, that allows to easily analyze direct and indirect effects of several types of models. This analysis has been therefore used to assert two hypotheses.

In case of H3, the aim was to predict brand detachment towards cosmetic brands using chemical ingredients from ethical consumer behavior, with brand attitude towards green cosmetic brands serving as a moderator of the relationship. What can be deduced from the result of the statistical analysis, is that, as illustrated in *Appendix 7*, the variables are moderately correlated, and the variance of the dependent variable can be explained for 26.22% by the dependent and moderator variables.

However, as displayed in *Table 2*, the interaction term is not statistically significant, reporting a result of $p = 0.743$, thus indicating that the predictive relationship between the dependent and the independent variable is not moderated by brand attitude towards green cosmetic products.

Table 2. Coefficients (H3)

Model 1	B	SE	t	p
ECB	0.3054	.0715	4.2577	.000
BAGP	0.4474	.0809	5.5278	.000
Interaction (ECB – BAGP)	0.0135	.0412	.3279	.743

- i. Independent Variable: Ethical consumer behavior
- ii. Dependent Variable: Brand detachment towards cosmetic brands using chemical ingredients
- iii. Moderator: Brand attitude towards green cosmetic brands.

On the other hand, when considering H4, we are evaluating the mediator effect of brand attitude towards cruelty-free cosmetic brands on the relationship between ethical consumer behavior and brand detachment towards cosmetic brands testing on animals. Evaluating the results, it is possible to assess that the model presents a reasonable correlation, and that 38,80% of the variance of the dependent variable can be justified by the independent one (*Appendix 8*).

Nevertheless, again the results prove that the interaction effect is not significant: indeed, *Table 3* displays a significance equal to $p = .262$, indicating a lack of moderation effect and thus confirming that brand attitude toward cruelty-free cosmetic brands does not act as a moderating variable impacting the relationship between ethical consumer behavior and brand detachment towards cosmetic brands testing on animals.

Table 3. Coefficients (H4)

Model 1	B	SE	t	p
ECB	0.1549	.0655	2.3649	.018
BAAT	0.6745	.0628	10.7322	.000
Interaction (ECB - BAAT)	0.0420	.0374	1.1222	.262

- i. Independent Variable: Ethical consumer behavior
- ii. Dependent Variable: Brand detachment towards cosmetic brands testing on animals
- iii. Moderator: Brand attitude towards cruelty-free cosmetic brands

According to the reported statistical results, it is possible to conclude that, being statistically significant and recording a positive correlation among the dependent and

independent variables, both brand detachment towards cosmetic brands testing on animals and brand detachment towards cosmetics brands using chemical ingredients are positively influenced by consumer's ethical behavior. Therefore, these results are able to support and accept the previously stated H1 and H2. On the other hand, however, although the data collected showed a correlation among brand attitude towards green cosmetic brands and cruelty-free brands and brand detachment, the interaction effect among the variables turned out to be not significant enough to be taken into consideration. Such outcome is indeed not able to support H3 and H4, which should be accordingly rejected.

5. Discussion

This section will provide an in-depth exploration of the results, pointing out the implications these may lead to, as well as the limitations encountered during the research, eventually providing solutions that could be adopted as a starting point for further research.

5.1. Theoretical implications

This study contributes to the assessment of the influence of Italian consumers' ethical behavior on brand detachment in two specific research areas, cosmetics containing chemical ingredients and cosmetics involving research on animals. As a result of the findings of the statistical analysis, it is possible to conclude that consumers' propensity to ethical purchases is directly reflected on brand detachment towards cosmetic brands testing on animals and on brand detachment towards cosmetic brands using chemical ingredients. In other words, Italian buyers that are more ethically conscious during their purchases are also more likely to boycott cosmetic brands that either use environmental harming ingredients or that still exploit animals for research. These results show the progressively concern of Italian consumers regarding the importance of ethicality and sustainability during the decision-making process of buying cosmetics products, to the point of questioning their attachment to a specific brand.

From previous studies, several discrepancies and contradictory results were reported on the topic. The findings of the analysis can be considered consistent with what previously reported by Garanti (2019), that proved the presence of a directly proportional relationship between ethical brand perception and attachment to ethical brands. Indeed, the outcomes of our research highlight the impact that such behavior has on detachment towards unethical cosmetic brands. On the other hand, the results reported are in contrast to what previously stated by Carrigan and Attalla (2001), according to who ethical consciousness is not always a good enough reason to detach from a brand that carries out unethical practices. Indeed, from our results, it is possible to prove the correlation between these variables and therefore object with what previously stated.

On the other hand, the findings also revealed that brand attitude towards green cosmetic brands and brand attitude towards cruelty-free brand did not have any moderation effect on the previously described relationships. As a matter of fact, whether one has a positive attitude towards ethical cosmetic brands or not, this would not impact in any way the relationship between an individual's ethical behavior and their willingness to boycott unethical cosmetic companies, as it was deemed a non-significant factor in the research.

Brand attitude should therefore not be considered as a moderator of such interaction but could rather be investigated solely in relation to brand detachment: indeed, brand attitude still represents an influential factor when it comes to boycotting unethical cosmetic brands. What it has been possible to ascertain from the reported results is the significant level of correlation between brand attitude and brand detachment, both in the case of brands that test on animals and of brands that use chemical ingredients. Indeed, the more an individual presents a positive attitude towards ethical brands, the more he/she will be inclined to reject brands that still perform unethical practices. These results can be considered in line to what stated in prior research: in the case of green cosmetic brands, these findings can be regarded as related to what

first established by Akhtar et al (2021), that assessed a strong effect of green attitude on the consumer's willingness to consume green products. As a consequence, this would lead individuals to buy more green products and thus abandon brands that are considered environmentally harmful. Likewise, in the case of cruelty-free brands, the outcomes of our analysis can be considered an addition to Alaouir et al (2019) previous conclusions, that proved that positive brand attitude has a direct effect on consumer purchase intention towards cruelty-free cosmetic brands. Interestingly, brand attitude has a stronger correlation with the dependent variables compared to ethical consumer behavior, thus indicating a more significant impact on brand detachment behaviors when it comes to unethical cosmetic brands.

5.2. Managerial implications

The outcomes of the research also apply, in a more tangible way, to cosmetic companies, that should consider them to develop their business models and improve their strategies accordingly. Indeed, from a managerial perspective, these results should serve as a wake-up call to managers of cosmetic companies still employing this kind of unethical practices. In such a competitive industry, where building connections and making sure to form an emotional attachment with consumers is vital, this could pose a serious challenge for multiple cosmetic brands. As a consequence of purchasers becoming increasingly more motivated to consume ethically, results of this study confirm that not being able to satisfy consumers on that front could possibly be a reason for brand detachment. Therefore, the risk of brand switching due to ethical incentives is certainly a possibility that managers should take into consideration.

As validated by the outcomes of the research, positive brand attitude towards cruelty-free and green cosmetics plays a significant role in consumer's minds when it comes to cosmetic brands. Therefore, as a result, managers should focus on new approaches to business that promote social and environmental welfare, for instance through the adoption of alternative methods of research other than animal testing that, besides being harmful to animals, is extremely obsolete and less

effective than other types of procedures (Ap, 2018). When it comes to distributing to countries such as China, where testing cosmetics on animals is considered mandatory, managers should instead start considering the idea of selling online, exploiting e-commerce platforms and online retailer partnerships, such as to be able to conform to the country's norms without compromising their position. Similarly, the adoption of ingredients that do not harm the environment should also be considered as a way to work towards a more sustainable and ethical business model. Indeed, managers should start approaching the idea of natural cosmetics, as it not only allows for a greener alternative in terms of sustainability, but also represent a healthier solution for consumers. Such practices, besides helping fulfilling consumers' altruistic motives that would eventually have strong impact on their buying intentions (Schuitema & de Groot, 2014), could also be implemented as a mean to drive innovation and enhance competitive advantage in a market where it is necessary to always be one step further.

As a conclusion, it is possible to state that, considering Italian consumers' developing awareness of sustainable and ethical issues and their willingness to detach from brands that position themselves far-off from their own values and beliefs, managers should not underestimate the consequences of unethical behaviors, but rather employ measures that prove the transparency and environmental engagement of the company.

5.3. Limitations and Further Research

Despite the noteworthy insights obtained with the research, the study has been subject to limitations that may have caused and influenced the results obtained. These limitations could certainly represent a starting point to perform further research on the subject, developing aspects that, for the purpose of this study, have been overlooked or only partially analyzed.

For starters, a limitation has been posed by the lack of relevant prior research on the topic: despite ethical consumerism being a phenomenon of particular relevance recently, and therefore being the focus of several research papers, only a very limited number of studies

specifically addressed the issue in the context of the cosmetic industry. However, this helped detecting new gaps in the literature and suggested the need for further investigation in this specific area of study.

Furthermore, time constraints have forced the collection of quantitative data in a time-period of three weeks, thus limiting the ability to gather additional information. Although it was still possible to achieve a relevant sample size of 310 surveyed individuals, this constraint calls for the possibility to develop a further longitudinal study on the subject, that would allow for the collection of a larger data set to analyze, therefore refining the results of the research.

Moreover, shaping the analysis merely on Italian consumers' perception has narrowed the scope of the study, not allowing for a comprehensive understanding of consumer's behavior towards unethical cosmetic brands. Indeed, given the very specific target chosen for the sample, results could have been influenced by cultural biases that, however, may not apply to consumers from different locations. Therefore, the study could be further progressed by addressing the analysis on a broader target, either a random sample, that would give the opportunity to assess consumers general perception on the subject, or even a sample focused on a secondary location, such as the United States, nowadays considered the biggest cosmetic market worldwide.

Finally, the boundary set by focusing solely on cruelty-free and green cosmetic brands, has precluded a broader vision of the perception of ethical companies. Indeed, limiting the concept of ethical consumption to such variables may only partially reflect the reasons linked with sustainability that would lead consumer to boycott a cosmetic brand. This leads to the need for a more thorough analysis that should include new inputs. These could be focused both on environmental impact, such as through the adoption of cosmetic packaging as a variable, and therefore including plastic-free and sustainable packaging in the analysis, or also on social matters, such as addressing the issue of child labor in the beauty industry.

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Appendix

Appendix 1. Online Questionnaire

Introduction:

Dear participant, thank you for taking the time to participate in this survey.

The questionnaire was developed with the purpose of analyzing the effects of ethical consumer behavior and brand attitude on brand detachment in the cosmetic sector.

It will take around 5 minutes to complete and your participation is completely voluntary. The information recorded are anonymous and strictly confidential and will be used solely for aggregated data analysis for the research project.

In case of any question that may arise about the project or during the completion of the survey, please contact me via email: 43279@novasbe.pt

Think about your usual purchases. How much do you agree with the following statements?

1. When there is a choice, I always choose the product that contributes to the least amount of environmental damage.
2. I have switched products for environmental reasons.
3. If I understand the potential damage to the environment that some products can cause, I do not purchase those products.
4. Whenever possible, I buy products packaged in reusable or recyclable containers.
5. I have paid more for environmentally friendly products when there is a cheaper alternative.

Cruelty free brands sell cosmetics that have not been tested on animals. How much do you agree with the following statements?

1. For me, using cruelty-free cosmetic is wise.
2. I like cruelty-free cosmetic products.
3. I feel proud when I buy/use cruelty-free cosmetic products.
4. Buying cruelty-free cosmetic products will make me happy
5. I am willing to spend a little more money to buy cruelty-free products

Green cosmetics are cosmetics that are manufactured using all-natural, non-toxic ingredient. How much do you agree with the following statements?

1. For me, using green cosmetic is wise.
2. I like green cosmetic products.
3. I feel proud when I buy/use green cosmetic products.
4. Buying green cosmetic products will make me happy
5. I am willing to spend a little more money to buy green products

Please, think of a cosmetic brand you are attached to. Imagine finding out that this brand carries out tests on animals in order to sell their products. How much do you agree with the following statements?

1. I no longer like this brand
2. I no longer pay attention to this brand
3. I no longer think about this brand
4. I am no longer attracted by this brand
5. I am still interested by what this brand offers.

Please, think of a cosmetic brand you are attached to. Imagine finding out that this brand uses chemical ingredients in its products. How much do you agree with the following statements?

1. I no longer like this brand
2. I no longer pay attention to this brand
3. I no longer think about this brand
4. I am no longer attracted by this brand
5. I am still interested by what this brand offers.

Gender:

- Male
- Female
- I don't want to say

Age Group:

- Under 18
- 18-25
- 26-40
- 41-60
- Over 60

Country:

Appendix 2. Scale reliability

Scales	Cronbach's alpha (> 0.7)
Ethical Consumer Behavior	0.82
Brand attitude towards green cosmetic brands	0.90
Brand attitude towards cruelty-free cosmetic brands	0.89
Brand detachment towards cosmetic brands using chemical ingredients	0.89
Brand detachment towards cosmetic brands testing on animals	0.90

Appendix 3. Model Summary (H1)

R	R Square	Adjusted R Square	Std. Error of Estimate
0.428	0.183	0.180	1.19053

- i. Independent Variable: Ethical consumer behavior
- ii. Dependent Variable: Brand detachment towards cosmetic brands using chemical ingredients

Appendix 4. Model Summary (H2)

R	R Square	Adjusted R Square	Std. Error of Estimate
0.384	0.148	0.145	1.25956

- i. Independent Variable: Ethical consumer behavior
- ii. Dependent Variable: Brand detachment towards cosmetic brands testing on animals

Appendix 5. ANOVA Table (H1)

Model	df	F	Sig.
Regression	1	68.926	<.001
Residual	308		

- i. Independent Variable: Ethical consumer behavior
- ii. Dependent Variable: Brand detachment towards cosmetic brands using chemical ingredients

Appendix 6. ANOVA Table (H2)

Model	df	F	Sig.
Regression	1	53.398	<.001
Residual	308		

- i. Independent Variable: Ethical consumer behavior
- ii. Dependent Variable: Brand detachment towards cosmetic brands testing on animals

Appendix 7. Model Summary (H3)

R	R Square	Adjusted R Square	Std. Error of Estimate
0.512	0.262	0.257	1.13334

- i. Independent Variable: Ethical consumer behavior
- ii. Dependent Variable: Brand detachment towards cosmetic brands using chemical ingredients
- iii. Moderator: Brand attitude towards green cosmetic brands

Appendix 8. Model Summary (H4)

R	R Square	Adjusted R Square	Std. Error of Estimate
0.622	0.388	0.382	1.07086

- i. Independent Variable: Ethical consumer behavior
- ii. Dependent Variable: Brand detachment towards cosmetic brands using chemical ingredients
- iii. Moderator: Brand attitude towards cruelty-free cosmetic brands