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Beyond Skin

Unveiling the Cultural Impact on Ethical Skincare Brand Marketing
through a Comparative Case Study

by

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Abstract

Title: Beyond Skin: Unveiling the Cultural Impact on Ethical Skincare Brand Marketing through a Comparative Case Study

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Thesis purpose: The purpose of this study is to understand how national culture plays a role in consumer perceptions through a comparative case study of three different ethical skincare brands from three different countries.

Methodology: This study makes use of a qualitative research method, data collection is done through semi-structured mediated interviews of 20 participants from 14 different countries.

Theoretical perspective: Theoretical perspectives for this research include a relativist ontology approach and a social constructionist stance of Epistemology.

Empirical data: The findings are based on data collected from participants after a 3-day interaction period with the brands. This includes their views and opinions on the three skincare brands and their perceptions of different cultural factors and themes.

Findings/conclusions: We conclude that national culture has demonstrated its lasting hold on consumer perceptions, even within this fairly new realm of ethical skincare brand marketing. We believe that culture is in our DNA and shapes our perception and behaviour. It's real people who consume, therefore, our individual decisions are important.

Practical implications: The practical implication of this study is to provide some input to ethical brands in developing marketing strategies that can be globally and locally relevant. Understanding how cultural factors influence consumer perceptions can help brands tailor their messages to better resonate with local audiences.

Keywords: Ethical Skincare, Marketing and Communication, National Culture, Consumer Perception.

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1 Introduction

The following chapter gives an overview of the research background, key definitions in our study, aim and objectives, research purpose, delimitations and the thesis outline.

1.1 Background

Ethicality has not always been synonymous with the beauty industry, nor was it ever an expectation that the products we use on our skin should also prioritise environmental safety. The idea that beauty products can be ethically sourced and sustainable for the planet arose in the 1980s with the emergence of this “environmentally sustainable organic beauty market,” (Connelly, 2013, p.3). Today, it’s been more prevalent in the products we search for and the media we consume. The push for ethical skincare products that are non-toxic for consumers and the environment has increased (Acme-Hardesty, 2024), with an estimated market size that is forecasted to increase globally by 2.44 billion USD between the years 2022 to 2027 (Technavio, 2024). The re-emergence of this trend is due to consumers being more conscious of their decisions and prioritising products free from synthetic chemicals or potentially harmful ingredients that conventional skincare products may use (MarkWide Research, 2024). The growth of this ethical skincare landscape has led to a significant reduction in animal testing and an increased use of plant-based ingredients. Consequently, these have had the power to harness this culture of cruelty-free methods and products that prioritise ethical standards, while addressing skin issues and improving the overall health of skin (EMagazine, 2024).

Consumers who are actively choosing ethical brands that promote clean ingredients, eco-friendly products, alternative testing methods and packaging solutions, are aiding brands in the reduction of consumption and excessive waste on our planet (UntitledTeam, 2023). This wave of consumers prefer brands that align with their values and are pushing for ethicality to become a standard in the beauty industry, helping to create a ripple effect (The Green Beauty Community, 2024). For example, the name brand L’Oreal has taken notice of these sustainable brands. In 2021, L’Oreal acquired Youth to the People, a 100% vegan-based skincare brand with products that reflect consumers’ values and their appreciation of high-efficacy products that do not cause harm to themselves or the environment (Rydzek, 2021). This acquisition does not end here, in 2023, L’Oreal acquired an Australian skincare

brand that sells vegan and cruelty-free products, known as Aesop (Whittle, 2023). The acquisition of these skincare brands by a leader in the cosmetics industry reflects the changing landscape in the skincare industry, and the need to become aware of these ethical and cruelty-free skincare brands growing in recognition and sales.

Social media has aided the increased exposure of ethical products in the beauty industry. By becoming a place where people create, share and express their opinions, it has become an essential communication channel for companies to endorse their products to a multitude of consumers (Pop, Săplăcan & Alt, 2020). This surge of the conscious consumer has resulted in companies discovering a new approach to marketing their products, with the visual nature that social media allows, brands can be part of the current conversation of popular trends and skincare routines (Garcia, 2019). With this interactive branding and the growing social consciousness for the environment, brands and consumers have adapted towards this new ethical and sustainable mindset (Gupta, 2023).

In this evolving digital landscape that connects online marketing with sustainability marketing, comes the challenge of incorporating culture into the marketing and communications mix. Culture, in its literal sense, is a shared set of attitudes, values and behaviours shared amongst a group of people (Merriam-Webster, 2024). With the emergence of globalisation, academics such as Nakata (2009), have argued for the growing presence of a global culture and the assumption that consumers are much more flexible in regards to embracing new cultural identities that are not their own. However, scholars have also indicated that it is because of national culture that consumer behaviour can be influenced to satisfy particular consumer preferences (Mohamed, Ünsalan & Abdinasir, 2024). Psychologists in the field, Banaji and Greenwald (2013), have explored the hidden biases present among individuals and how common it is for people to be influenced by long-term exposure to their cultural attitudes; this includes biases towards age, gender, social class, disabilities and most importantly, among other nationalities.

Additionally, this increased ethical concern to assume responsibility for ourselves and the planet, has given rise to consumption that connects to our ethical and social behaviours, known as ethical consumerism (Mazar & Zhong, 2010). It has been argued that exposure to these products can activate a set of norms and behaviours among consumers to act more ethically, these behaviours can only manifest themselves from years of decisions and exposure to different elements (Mazar & Zhong, 2010). Furthermore, we believe all those years of exposure to a person's cultural attitudes affect not only all the decisions they make daily but also the behaviours and preferences consumers have toward ethical products.

In our research, we explore the perceptions of various consumers, between 18-30 years old. For this purpose, we have strategically selected the three following companies; *Good Molecules*, *Arami Essentials* and *Ida Warg Beauty*.

Our Chosen Ethical Skincare Brands

In our research, we chose brands that were comparable in size, age and global reach to further understand how they may differ.

Firstly, Good Molecules is an American skincare brand owned by beauty retailer Beautylish, founded in 2018 in West Hollywood, California. It is targeted as a global skincare company selling simple and safe ingredients for the skin while being sold at reasonable prices to ensure that it is affordable for global consumers (Good Molecules, 2024). The brand creates skincare solutions that are “backed by research and formulated for effectiveness” and are sustainable for the planet (Good Molecules, 2024). They have an extensive list of skincare ingredients on their website, further backing their efforts of being transparent with a, “nothing to hide” mindset (Philstar Global, 2021).

Secondly, Arami Essentials is a Nigerian skincare brand founded in 2016, using natural, raw and locally sourced ingredients that are kind to the skin, with simple ingredients sourced from the lush lands of Africa (Arami Essentials, 2023). The brand's goal is to positively impact the lives of the female farmers at the centre of Africa’s resource supply chain while being sustainable and environmentally conscious (Arami Earth, 2023).

Lastly, Ida Warg Beauty is a Swedish beauty brand founded in Stockholm in 2018, that focuses on modern and high-quality products that are 100% ethical. The brand's range of products includes self-tanning, hair care, skincare, makeup and body care that is specially adapted to your different needs (Ida Warg Beauty, 2024). They emphasise their vegan and cruelty-free stance, to provide consumers with the highest quality product they can offer at the best possible price (Ida Warg Beauty, 2024).

Relevance

The three different national cultures we have chosen: the United States, Nigeria and Sweden, have proven themselves to be leaders in the skincare industry with the United States set to reach a revenue of nearly 24.35 billion USD in 2024 (Statista, 2024), with Nigeria following at 2.44 billion USD (Statista, 2024) and Sweden with a projected revenue of 707 million USD (Statista, 2024).

Considering that the majority of research has occurred mostly in Western countries, for marketing to advance, marketing theories and models need to be examined in other cultural settings (Steenkamp, 2001). Therefore, examining the role of national culture in marketing teaches “how theories and paradigms reflect the culture in which they were developed” (Steenkamp, 2001). Additionally, both writers for this research come from multicultural

backgrounds, one from Nigeria and the other from the United States, both currently residing in Sweden, emphasising the global relevance of this study.

As beauty brands strive to cater to a diverse consumer base, understanding how cultural differences play a role in consumer perceptions becomes crucial. This study contributes to the current conversation of the push for diversity and inclusivity in the beauty industry, including the representation of different cultures, ethnicities and skin types. Our unique experiences living in diverse cultural settings provide valuable empirical insights into the complexities of consumer perceptions and behaviours.

1.1.1 Definitions

Ethical Skincare

“Ethical products are products concerned with social, environmental, animal welfare and fair trade issues throughout their life cycle” (Garlet et al., 2024). Therefore, in applying this definition to skincare products, we can infer that ethical skincare can be defined as products created to consider the environment, and well-being of animals, the planet and the people living in it.

National Culture

National culture is the shared beliefs, norms and values present within a nation and how this manifests through characteristics, such as language, religion, social behaviour, racial identity, beauty standards and cultural traditions (IGI Global, 2024). It has the power to influence business strategies to satisfy existing consumer preferences (StudySmarter UK, 2024).

Consumer Perception

This refers to the feelings and beliefs the consumer may have about your product, and the brand itself. This process can be influenced by the pricing and effectiveness of the product, social media, and reviews on the customer experience with the brand (Inabo, 2024). Consumer perception is an essential aspect of any brand, contributing towards brand loyalty, brand awareness, brand reputation and ultimately the consumers’ buying intentions (Thiruvengatraj & Vetrivel, 2017).

1.2 Aim and Objectives

This study aims to explore how national culture plays a role in consumer perceptions by examining how three ethical skincare brands market and communicate their products. By comparing the marketing and communications of ethical skincare brands from our home countries, and a well-known Swedish brand, we seek to understand how national culture perceptions may influence the interactions consumers have with brands from different cultural contexts. The objective is to identify key cultural dimensions and factors that affect consumer perceptions of our chosen brands to develop a deeper understanding of preconceived biases towards different cultures than our own. This could additionally lead to a further understanding of consumers' buying intentions.

By exploring these brands and how they portray themselves in the digital space, we seek to find the implications of cultural influences on consumer perceptions of consumers from different countries. Within the scope of the thesis, we would like to explore if these preconceived biases from our national culture still exist in consumers from different markets. Our research will aid us in uncovering whether global skincare companies have been able to integrate a global culture into their marketing and communications or whether national culture still has an impact on the perceptions of consumers. Have the lines between national cultures truly been blurred?

1.3 Research Purpose

The skincare industry has faced cultural diversity issues. In many cases, products are majorly developed and prioritised for lighter skin colours or those living in the global North. In contrast, other ethnicities, cultures and markets have been heavily ignored. Skin conditions often present themselves differently for people with darker skin tones and skincare products must be developed with this in mind (Weiner, 2020). Furthermore, many markets represent skin concerns that apply within their culture. For example, in Europe, we have noted anti-wrinkling or anti-aging products to be most common; in Asia, skin-lightening products are a popular trend. Global skincare brands such as L'oreal, Nivea and Unilever promote the acceptance of all skin colours in the West, however in Asia, Africa and the Middle East, skin-whitening is promoted, suggesting that "lighter is better" (Holland, 2022). This leads to the differences in consumer focus concerning the culture they are targeting, leading to the belief that culture defines a brand's focus.

Nevertheless, consumers from different cultures tend to form their own preconceived perceptions about products coming from cultures that are not their own. Another example of this is seen in Scandinavian skincare, where there is no question about quality or sustainability initiatives, as Sweden is perceived as one of the most sustainable countries in the world (Colonial, 2024). All of these exemplify the existence of preconceived notions deciding what products consumers buy.

In our research, we question how national culture, and biases form perceptions and in what aspects these perceptions may manifest themselves in. We explore the notion of whether brands have adapted towards a global culture, or if national culture still plays a role in marketing and communications.

The purpose of this study is to understand how three different skincare brands from three different countries, market and communicate their similar skincare products. To fulfil this purpose, we pose the following research question:

How does national culture impact consumer perceptions regarding ethical skincare brand marketing?

Using existing theoretical and empirical evidence, we explore the role of culture in shaping consumers' perceptions of ethical skincare brands and their marketing strategies on their digital promotional channels. We intend to advance our understanding of how these prospective countries market to their consumers and to note the differing and contrasting market communication strategies employed. By doing so, we can note if national culture plays into how diverse and inclusive marketing messages are at present and whether consumers prefer their own cultural marketing messages instead of others. This research can aid ethical skincare brands in effectively engaging with culturally diverse consumers.

1.4 Delimitations

Due to the diverse features and unique marketing dynamics of the different social media platforms, we focus our research on Instagram and the website of our brands, due to its global characteristics and relevance to our research question. All three of the brands we focus on for this study are active. Our focus on the three countries; Sweden, Nigeria and The United States, is due to their differences in cultural contexts and marketing practices. For our research, we limit the study to the last 5 years, between 2019 and 2024. Although one of our chosen brands is in a country where the official language is Swedish, our study is conducted in English.

The concept of national culture is complex, therefore, for this study, we focus on cultural nuances relevant to our research question. We categorise national culture as someone residing in a country long-term for 5-10 years. By establishing these delimitations, the study aims to provide a focus and in-depth analysis of the relationship between digital marketing channels like Instagram, and how national culture plays a role in the brand marketing communications of ethical skincare brands.

1.5 Outline of the Thesis

This thesis is structured into five main chapters, each chapter addresses specific aspects of the research topic. The first chapter begins with an introduction that includes a background, aim, purpose of the study, delimitations and an outline of our research. The second chapter is dedicated to the literature and theoretical background as well as a review of the research question. In the third chapter, we introduce our methodology, research approach and design, data collection method and analysis, ethical considerations, validity and reliability, and limitations. This is followed by our fourth chapter where we present and discuss our research findings. Our fifth chapter discusses the managerial, practical and theoretical implications of our research. Finally, the sixth chapter of our study provides a conclusion of our research, our key findings are presented, limitations, and future research opportunities of our study.

2 Literature Review

With our literature review, we aim to deduce whether culture is an influential factor in the marketing messages of sustainable companies. This provides us with a foundation for understanding the pre-existing theoretical frameworks done so far that contribute to our research and a further understanding of how culture may influence consumer perception.

2.1 Marketing & Communication Strategies in the Digital Space

“...Marketing finds a way to integrate the consumer into the company, to create and *sustain* a relationship between the company and the customer.” (Mckenna, 1991)

Marketing, as described by Mckenna (1991), has evolved into a method for companies to involve the consumer in any way that they can, this digital era has been able to transform the way companies interact with their consumers and build connections. Although the globalisation of companies has become the norm for brands who wish to expand their consumer base globally, most companies originate from a certain country, and first aim to build their brand towards the audience in their home country (Schlegelmilch, 2022). Scholars, such as Moore & Rugman (2002), argue the importance of companies thinking regionally, before thinking globally, affirming that it is in a company’s best interest to first consider the preferences of the regional consumers before embarking on a global strategy for the product from the beginning. Additionally, a key aspect of differentiation is how a brand uses social media marketing (Schlegelmilch, 2022). Social media marketing, also known as SMM, currently encourages this platform that knows no restrictions regarding location or time, allowing consumers to interact with the brand at any given moment (Ibrahim et al., 2023). On SMM platforms, such as Instagram, photo and video sharing can captivate consumers and encourage companies to get creative with their content through ads, by doing so, they can create an impact on their business (Instagram for Business, 2024). In regards to SMM activities, authors Kim & Ko (2010) established a framework that discusses the five key aspects that are most effective in the social media space, such as; entertainment, interaction, customisation, trendiness, and word-of-mouth. Although Kim & Ko (2010), discussed how these factors influence buying intentions in the Korean luxury fashion industry, it is a

framework that can apply to any industry employing their marketing and communication strategies on a digital platform.

Lim (2015), the author established a link between using the internet for advertising, such as social media platforms, and E-WOM and how it can directly influence consumer perceptions and intentions. Lim emphasises that online marketing has proven to be more influential than traditional methods, such as face-to-face marketing or even personal WOM due to its reach. Although Lim (2015), conducted his research on e-commerce platforms, Lim's theoretical contribution has proven the impact of the digital space on consumer transactions and predicting how consumers may behave. Our author highlights the growing importance of information (Lim, 2015), contributing to the rise of the more transparent and knowledgeable consumer.

Additionally, digital marketing strategies, including the methods by which brands communicate to consumers, whether through storytelling or content creation (Maj, 2024), have become crucial tools for brands to promote their sustainable alternatives to the masses of consumers. Considering Instagram has achieved global success with nearly two billion active users at the beginning of 2024, as well as being one of the most effective tools for marketing and communications (Dixon, 2024) this study sought to investigate how three regionally distinct brands that have a strong presence on this platform, market and communicate their ethical skincare products, and whether national culture plays a part in consumer perception.

This emerging sustainable skincare marketing in the digital space has many terms: vegan, ethical, sustainable, green, conscious, and organic, among others, even though this study focuses on ethical beauty and brands that describe themselves as such, it is important to consider research done on the adjacent terms that ultimately do promote a more sustainable skincare product, but just ever so slightly is another term altogether. The communication method studied by Dos Santos, De Brito Silva, Da Costa, et al. (2023) in the vegan beauty industry, entailed that the use of social media with influencers or content that promoted endorsement has a positive effect on consumer perception, as long as they are credible in three aspects per the source credibility theory (Kelman, 1961): (1) expertise, (2) trustworthiness and (3) attractiveness. Considering the third feature is attractiveness, it is crucial to note how attractiveness in our study is subjective. Many people's views on attractiveness may differ by the features they are accustomed to, in this study (Dos Santos, De Brito Silva, Da Costa, et al., 2023) referred to attractiveness as an appealing communicator or influencer that appeals to the given sector, which then facilitates an acceptance of the digital message the consumers are receiving. Furthermore, this ever-evolving new medium of digital media does not only allow consumers to follow the brand through social media. Rather it enables them to research them through their websites, online forums, and online communities and even grants them the possibility to message the brand themselves, allowing every

opportunity for the consumer to engage with the brand as much as possible (Teixeira, Oliveira, Teixeira & Teixeira, 2023).

2.2 National Culture in Marketing Communication

Before Hofstede, the existing literature regarding culture connected it towards organisational culture (Jaques, 1951), while organisational culture is imperative to the inner workings of a company, Hofstede understood the cultural values present within a company amongst the individuals, arguing that motivations are ordered differently in different cultures (Hofstede, 1991).

As distinguished by Hofstede (1994), the original five dimensions of national culture helped measure culture through (1) power distance, (2) individualism vs. collectivism, (3) masculinity vs. femininity, (4) uncertainty avoidance and (5) long-term vs short-term orientation. The first dimension of power distance refers to how people in a society relate to each other on a hierarchical scale (Hofstede, Hofstede, & Minkov 2010). Concerning the countries our ethical skincare brands are from, Hofstede (1994) helps us understand that current research reflects that power distance measures are high in African countries, but lower in Germanic and Western countries (Hofstede, 2001).

The second cultural dimension of identity, as discussed by scholar Weinland (2023), describes identity using two spectrums, either for the benefit of the group or for the benefit of the individual. Cultures who would place a large importance on the individual side of the spectrum value individual rights, whereas those who highly value group efforts, preferred a collectivist culture (Hofstede, 2001). As noted by Hofstede (1994), the individualistic mindset rules in Western countries, whereas this collectivist mindset can be found in Eastern countries, and especially high in West Africa (Bell, 2021). The third dimension of masculinity vs. femininity discusses the extent to which a society favours masculine qualities, in many cases, this is when work and achievement take over a large part of someone's life (Bright et al., 2019). Contributes to our research and found masculinity to be high in Anglo countries, such as the United States, whereas many scholars studying this masculinity dimension concerning Africa (e.g. Eberonwu 2021; Oppong 2013; Nyambegera, Kamoche & Siebers, 2016) have found certain regions high in masculinity, whereas others low; even so, the common observation for West Africa is there is a slight favour towards a feminine culture present (Nyambegera, Kamoche & Siebers, 2016). Compared to Sweden which is found to be considerably low in masculinity (Hofstede, 1994). These feminine countries are most likely to emphasise quality of life and service to others as values that are considerably more important than any monetary achievement would be (Hofstede, 1991).

The fourth dimension of uncertainty avoidance discusses how members of a culture would feel threatened by unknown situations or whether they would keep an open mind to the situation (Barnum, 2011). According to Hofstede (1994), uncertainty avoidance is low in Nordic and Anglo countries, and studies conducted on Hofstede's dimensions in West Africa found regions, specifically Nigeria, to be moderately high on the uncertainty avoidance index (IBC, 2007). This helps us understand that countries like Sweden and the United States are more open to other people's opinions and accepting of different stances. Whereas West African countries may tread with caution over these differentiating ideas (Hofstede, 1994). Ultimately, the fifth dimension of long-term vs short-term orientation discusses whether a culture leans more towards instant gratification or investing in future goals (Mahr, 2024). Sweden is known as a long-term orientation country (Sadikhova, 2021), whereas scholars (Oppong, 2013) have identified West Africa as a short-term country, along with the United States displaying an attitude towards short-term goals (Hofstede, 1994).

Although criticism for Hofstede's national culture dimensions exists and scholars have questioned whether nations are a suitable unit to measure (McSweeney, 2002), it has been argued that nations are one of the *only* measurements we have regarding someone's culture (Hofstede, 2002; Oppong, 2013), especially considering how difficult it is to measure a person's culture and identity truly. It is through these literature streams we can understand how different cultures may manifest themselves through society in various ways, and how a person's social identity may be formed by the people and values surrounding them (Weinland, 2023). These understandings of the general dimensions towards which a country leans can provide us with a foundation on how different national cultures may react in the context of ethical skincare marketing and communications.

Even though our ethical skincare brands can be considered global skincare companies, consumers first had to consume the product locally for these brands to garner the success they have. These local consumers had some degree of influence in regards to the marketing strategies the brand decided to pursue at the early stages, this personality of a society can shape a consumer's preferences towards particular tastes and attitudes towards a product (Mohamed, Ünsalan & Abdinasir, 2024).

As it was argued by Mohamed, Ünsalan & Abdinasir (2024), culture can influence more than just the preferences of a consumer, rather it also has the power to decide on what information consumers store and utilise for their decision-making process. The impact of national culture on marketing communications has been evaluated by Kale (1991), stating that for brands to influence consumers, "the content and the style of the seller's communication [must be] culture-based," it is one of the methods that has proven most successful in securing the sale of the product. Kale (1991) establishes the fact that existing research has proved national culture in marketing communications to be effective, our research aims to address a new perspective

in which we question whether the existing national culture of a brand has the same effect on people living in diverse national cultures.

In Figure 1, we demonstrate a visual national culture comparison graph about our chosen cultures of the brands we are focusing on: the United States, Nigeria and Sweden. Although this graph presents the six dimensions of national culture later presented by Hofstede, our research focuses on the original five dimensions (Hofstede, 1994).

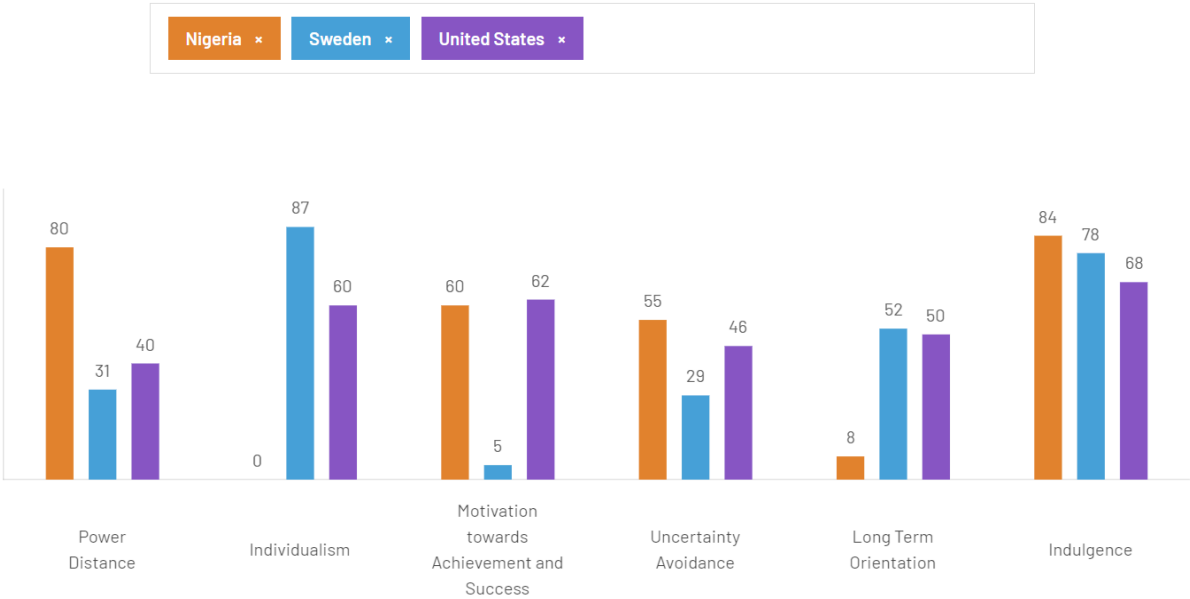


Figure 1: Hofstede’s Cultural Dimensions in Our Chosen National Cultures (Hofstede Insights, 2024)

2.2.1 Global Culture Vs. National Culture

Nakata (2009) urges scholars to look beyond Hofstede in their work, especially with the globalising world we live in and the need to integrate all cultures into communications. Nakata (2009) argues for the ease in facilitating different cultures, however, they discuss that the main aspect where global companies struggle the most is in incorporating differing cultural contexts and struggles. In other words, companies may be global in their marketing approach, but they are superficial when it comes to directly targeting the issues and concerns of consumers living in different cultures. This could mean there is a level of ignorance that comes with the lack of exposure from the culture the brand is hoping to target.

Although it can be inferred that globalisation has encouraged this increasing presence of a global consumer culture, local consumer culture remains strong, as argued by Kim (2022).

The local consumer culture is representative of the practices and meanings of a person's national culture (Kim, 2022). This scholar, Kim (2022), studies the impact of local consumer culture through local imagery from the brand that is reflective of the target consumers' values and lifestyles. Further, this representation can lead to an authentic portrayal of the brand in the eyes of the consumer.

Additionally, Nakata (2009) makes it clear that this lack of deeper understanding of cultural contexts is at the root caused by Hofstede's national cultural dimensions; and that companies aim to understand his dimensions without going deeper into the nature of the culture (Nakata, 2009). In part, Nakata (2009) argues that although national culture can have the ability to shape preferences, globalisation has caused consumers to be more aware and exposed to the marketing of other cultures. This can lead to the learning and understanding of other cultures different from their own, which could cause possible biases to develop. Overall, this scholar poses the plausible question of the purity of our national cultural perceptions.

2.2.2 Culture and Symbolism in Brand Marketing

Over time, brands acquire an identity and meaning as a symbol of certain cultural values which help the brand establish legitimacy and authenticity in the consumer's mind (Jian et al., 2019). Scholars like Torelli et al (2010) and Kubat Swaminathan (2015) define brand cultural symbolism as a "collective perception" of the extent to which a brand symbolises the subtle values and moral norms of a certain cultural group (Jian et al., 2019). Academics in this field believe that brand cultural symbolism positively affects brand authenticity and that consumers feel positive emotions when they experience and consume brands with national cultural symbols they can resonate with (Jian et al., 2019). Similarly, Tan and Ming (2003) support the hypothesis that marketers generate brand symbolism and personality that become part of the consumers' lives and create a long-term relationship between the brand and themselves (Tan and Ming, 2003). This is because symbolic values and meanings help consumers to place themselves within a designated group such as "social status, gender, age, traditions and group identity" to retain a sense of the past in society (Tan and Ming, 2003).

Using an adaptation of Goodyear's model (1996), academics such as Wee and Ming (2003) identify six stages to describe the life of a brand (Tan and Ming, 2003). We identify two out of six that contribute to our research. In the third stage, where the marketers introduce symbolic values and meanings to the brand, many brands in this stage become known for their "functional benefits" which is when a brand's personality is associated with its emotional appeal, meanings and symbolic values. Once the brand has been associated with symbolic meanings and values, in the fourth stage the brand embodies those values and meanings and "becomes an icon for consumers" (Tan and Ming, 2003). "These common forms of feelings,

thoughts and behaviours, are acquired and transferred through symbols” (Unurlu and Uca, 2017).

Kapferer believes that a “brand itself is culture” and culture is the most important element in a brand’s personality (Unurlu and Uca, 2017). Since scholars have identified that culture has a direct influence on a brand's personality and performance, there are cultural factors to consider to fully understand a brand (Unurlu and Uca, 2017). For a brand to effectively convey itself to consumers, the functional benefits of the brand should be integrated with symbolic qualities such as the brand's personality (Unurlu and Uca, 2017). Additionally, the use of symbolic images helps to place the brand in the consumer's mind, providing them with clearer information about the products and consequently leading to a more positive attitude towards them as well (Mohamed, Ünsalan & Abdinasir, 2024). The link between the product and its national culture has the power to instil trust and help consumers perceive that they are connected to their national identity if they choose to purchase it (Mohamed, Ünsalan & Abdinasir, 2024).

For brands to choose the meanings and symbolic values they wish to employ, their symbols must coincide with their marketing mix and brand variables, resulting in a clear and enhanced image for the consumer (Jian et al., 2019). Brands with a focus on cultural symbolism or those that choose to embody cultural values and beliefs are often said to have high cultural equity (Jian et al., 2019).

2.3 Consumer Perceptions & Motivations

In regards to Dos Santos, De Brito Silva & Da Costa, et al. (2023) study on digital influencers in the vegan beauty industry, it was noted that in many cases, consumer perception is most positively influenced when consumers feel as if they can identify with the source they are viewing (Silalahi, Fachrurazi, Muchaddam Fahham & Liu, 2021). One way of achieving this is through the “snapshot aesthetic,” a phrase used by Colliander and Marder (2018), to describe a type of social media strategy in which brands try to connect more personally with consumers by posting organic and user-generated content that reflects a more laid-back and real version of the consumer. Most of this content is made using the average phone camera, instead of professional equipment. Additionally, academics such as Colliander & Marder (2018) describe the importance of studying the power of images in our new photo-sharing society, along with the increasing demand for brands to create meaningful content that is in alignment with the brand’s beliefs and overall aesthetic. Along with the need for organic content, Pine II and Gilmore (2007), have studied the importance of authenticity among brands. Consumers are now able to distinguish between what is real and what is fake (Pine II

& Gilmore, 2007), in a skincare industry that is saturated with ethical skincare products, authenticity is the one aspect that can differentiate you from the rest.

Authors such as Marchand et al (2010) reflect on the motivation behind consumers now adopting sustainable consumption patterns, such as, “altruistic and environmental considerations, ...[also fueled by] perceived personal benefits, including an expected increase in personal well-being” (Marchand et al., 2010). During their research, the writers found a group of consumers known as “Voluntary Simplifiers” who are conscious consumers that typically opt for more environmentally and socially responsible goods and services (Marchand et al., 2010). Interviews were then conducted with these consumers and self-interest motives were discovered; these included perceived personal benefits and product qualities including a desire for a “higher quality of life, more freedom and autonomy” (Marchand et al., 2010). Similarly, Camilleri et al. (2023) believe consumers evaluate sustainable products based on their functional values such as price and quality, and symbolic values such as appearance, emotional value and social status (Camilleri et al., 2023). Therefore, this proves that the shift in consumer preferences and behaviour can be attributed to the rising problems of sustainability and ethics (Dos Santos, De Brito Silva, Da Costa, et al., 2023).

Furthermore, consumers can be motivated to purchase products due to being influenced by factors such as ethnocentrism, which is a global phenomenon that affects brands. Ethnocentrism is when a person places their group as the centre of the world and uses it as a benchmark for others (Javalgi, Khare, Gross, and Scherer, 2005). Individuals like this have characteristics such as being intolerant of certain cultures different from their own and perceiving their culture as a source of pride (Erdogan and Uz Kurt, 2010). According to Kasper (1999), from a consumer perspective, ethnocentricity is consumers who perceive the quality of local products to be higher than their foreign equivalents (Erdogan and Uz Kurt, 2010). These beliefs directly affect their perceptions of the brand or product. The study conducted by Erdogan and Uz Kurt (2010) on Turkish consumers, found that “high levels of consumer ethnocentrism were significantly associated with strongly negative perceptions of foreign products and very positive perceptions of domestic products” (Erdogan and Uz Kurt, 2010).

Supanvanij and Amine (2000) found that other factors such as “the country of origin” also influence consumers' perceptions as when a consumer is not familiar with a product and its “intrinsic qualities”, they apply the country-of-origin cue to evaluate the foreign product. By observing where a product is made, consumers form their perception of the said product using their stereotypes of the said country (Supanvanij and Amine, 2000).

These theoretical factors and motivations will typically play a role in their willingness to purchase and can be applied to ethical products in the skincare industry.

2.3.1 Willingness to Purchase Ethical Products

Mai (2014) discusses how consumers consider ethical attributes in their decision-making process, by studying the labels consumers check when making an ethical purchase, those labels being: organic, fairtrade, or recyclable packaging. Although Mai's (2014) study is based on products found in the supermarket industry, the findings concluded that consumers are willing to pay more if their desired products align with their preferred ethical features. Additionally, it can be argued that the theory of social credibility presented to us by Kelman (1961) is built upon further by Mai (2014), stating that the credibility gained by product labelling is an important aspect of marketing. The truths of the label can build on the trustworthiness the consumer has with the product and shift their perceptions towards a positive one. Mai (2014), elucidates that the feature of recyclable packaging was most popular in contrast to products sourced from fair trade practices or organic certifications. This study further contributed towards the benefits of marketing a product's ethicality, and it is generalizable in the aspect that the more ethical features noted on a product, the more appealing it is to the consumer overall.

In considering how economic factors play a role in the purchase of ethical products, research finds that the wealthy and affluent have the means and the tendency to place significant value on sustainable products (Stewart, 2023). On the other hand, some scholars have found contradicting research that affluent consumers are least burdened by environmental issues and therefore less prone to purchase ethical products (Meyer & Liebe, 2010). In general, research finds that if a brand wishes to sell ethical products, it will be most successful in targeting middle-class consumer segments (Hicks-Webster, 2021; Yan, Keh & Chen, 2021), especially considering that the middle class is one of the segments contributing the most towards consumption in several countries worldwide (Hicks-Webster, 2021; Kharas, 2017). Although the consumer class segment was not an aspect of our study, it is interesting to note regarding this literature, that it is most likely that our three ethical brands are not aiming towards a specific class segment, but rather at consumers who are willing to go beyond non-toxicity and have the financial means to do so (Arami Essentials, 2024; Good Molecules, 2024; Ida Warg Beauty, 2023) further exemplifying their beliefs that ethical skincare products can be for all.

With consumers being more educated and informed of the products that abide towards generally safe requirements, this "consumer sophistication," a term provided to us by authors Carrigan and Attala (2001), does not always signify that consumers will engage in ethical buying behaviour. Although there is this growth of the sophisticated consumer, their characteristics and actual behaviour are not always in alignment with each other (Carrigan and Attala, 2001). Consumers may be more knowledgeable and financially able to make the right choice in accordance with ethicality, but they do not always act upon their beliefs; therefore, not acting upon the knowledge they possess.

Although Carrigan and Attala's (2001) research discusses ethical products, the authors build upon the ethicality of marketing strategies and whether these ethical products purchased are contributing towards a good cause. From this, we understand that ethical consumers are individuals who are likely to be well-educated and long-term oriented. Grankvist (2012) found that Sweden and Western countries have the most positive perception towards ethically labelled products and feel most inclined to purchase the higher-price point for an ethically sourced product. This provides us with a general grasp of the culture present in the United States and Sweden and how it can have favourable perceptions towards our ethical brands.

2.3.2 Consumer Preferences & Culture

The natural environment is a significant aspect of an individual's attitudes and beliefs, typically influenced by culture, as cultural values impact how individuals see the natural environment (Creazza et al., 2023). Schwartz's model of cultural orientations found that egalitarian and harmonious cultures had significantly lower carbon emissions and societal practices were more concerned with preservation for future generations as they were more likely to consider how their actions affect others (Creazza et al., 2023). The findings of academics, Higuera and Castillo et al. (2019), concluded that collectivist cultures resulted in a greater concern for the environment and were more likely to be positively influenced by sustainable behaviours than individualist cultures (Creazza et al., 2023).

WTP, known as willingness to pay, impacts environmentally sustainable consumer behaviour and relates to assessing monetary value to the environmental impact of delivery or transport service as part of the purchase decisions (Creazza et al., 2023). In examining e-consumers behaviour, consumers placed the most importance on price, delivery speed and tracking when choosing a logistics service. A study by Ignat and Chankov (2020) on German students found that consumers who were given information on the environmental impact of shipping were significantly willing to choose a more sustainable shipping method, even though this choice did not directly benefit them (Ignat & Chankov, 2020). This was found even when the customers had to wait longer, pay more, or receive their items at less convenient locations. In comparison, research done on U.S. consumers indicated strong environmental values but were significantly less likely to change delivery methods or change behaviour to positively impact the environment unless it resulted in better service or cost (Creazza et al., 2023). Studies showed that consumers' preferences regarding sustainable behavioural elements can be influenced by the level of knowledge and relevant information provided to consumers by brands. Knowledge and information on sustainability allow consumers to be informed, enabling them to make better ethical choices (Creazza et al., 2023).

Similarly, other factors influence consumers' preferences such as socioeconomics like; age, gender, income, occupation and lifestyle. These factors influence their buying behaviour

consequently affecting attitudes towards sustainable products and ultimately, the environment (Creazza et al., 2023).

For consumers in developing countries, global brands often represent more than just products or services; they are symbolic of a global lifestyle that might otherwise be less accessible. According to Cucato et al. (2022), these brands are associated with a way of life that appeals to many consumers in these regions. This attraction is partly because global brands offer a sense of connection to the broader world and its perceived higher standards of living.

However, this appeal is counterbalanced by a phenomenon known as consumer ethnocentrism, where consumers prefer products from their own country over foreign alternatives. As discussed in the previous section on consumer perceptions and motivations, ethnocentric consumers are wary of global brands that they perceive as threats to their local culture and economy. To overcome this challenge and build a lasting relationship with these consumers, global brands often adopt local characteristics and cultural elements in their branding and marketing strategies (Cucato et al., 2022).

By incorporating local customs, values, and traditions into their products and promotional activities, global brands can resonate more deeply with local consumers. This strategy, which combines the two terms, known as glocalization, helps global brands appear more relatable and respectful of local cultures, thus reducing resistance and increasing acceptance (Robertson, 1994).

Furthermore, consumers in developing countries seek out brands that align symbolically with their personal and cultural identities. They are drawn to brands that reflect their local heritage and aspirations towards a global identity. Brands that successfully blend these local and global elements can establish a stronger emotional connection with consumers. On the other hand, consumers tend to distance themselves from brands that do not resonate with their values or personal identity. For instance, if a global brand is perceived as culturally insensitive or too detached from local realities, it is likely to be rejected by the ethnocentric consumer base.

In summary, for global brands to succeed in developing countries, they must find a balance between embodying their global identity and integrating local cultural elements. This approach not only helps them win over ethnocentric consumers but also ensures that their brand resonates on a deeper, more personal level with the target audience, fostering long-term loyalty and brand affinity (Cucato et al., 2022).

2.4 Rise of Sustainability Marketing

In discussing the rise of sustainability in marketing, today's consumers are embracing sustainable and ethical brands now more than ever; pushing for innovative changes in various industries (Rebel, 2024). Sustainability in a branding context is defined as “satisfying the needs of present stakeholders without risking the needs of forthcoming stakeholders” (Sharma et al., 2021, Pg 6). “Within marketing the green movement has been viewed as an opportunity to identify and segment new markets” (McDonald and Oates, 2006) with well-established brands acquiring smaller leading sustainable brands to tap into and expand their market, examples such as L’oreal’s acquisition of The Body Shop (Ottman, 2011). Some scholars believe that any consumer has the potential to become a green consumer because if consumers are given the option of two identical products, where one is good for the environment and the other is not, they are more likely to choose the product that is good for the environment (McDonald and Oates, 2006).

Peattie (1998) established two identifiers on what impacts how consumers perceive purchases as “the degree of compromise” which considers factors such as the price of the product and how accessible the product is to the consumer, the second being “the degree of confidence” which is how confident the consumer is that the product presents environmental benefits and confronts a real issue (McDonald and Oates, 2006). On the other hand, the act of purchasing a green product, falls short of addressing sustainability issues, considering the “next part of green purchasing is in green disposal” (McDonald and Oates, 2006). Meaning, that it is no longer enough to create an ethical or sustainable product, further actions like promoting ethical disposal of said products are equally as important for brands. These academic concepts help ethical skincare brands better position or improve their product and marketing activities.

Furthermore, marketing has evolved from purely transaction-based to relationship-based, therefore brands must be more responsive to their markets (Fuxman et al, 2022). Consumers have become increasingly environmentally and socially conscious, seeking products or brands that align with their values and beliefs (Gardesi, 2022) and as sustainability is considered a megatrend that has an impact on every sector of life, understanding the significance of business sustainability is important for brands looking to remain competitive in the market (Sharma et al., 2021, pg 6) considering researchers believe that sustainability influences economic value, competitiveness, corporate personality and survival of an organisation, CEO’s at major companies have identified sustainability as a key success factor in the success of their companies (Sharma et al., 2021, pg 8).

In their study, Sharma et al. (2021), identified a framework for the evolution of sustainable marketing such as ecological, green marketing, greener marketing, sustainable marketing and sustainability marketing. As aforementioned, the idea of sustainability marketing has

stemmed from multiple synonymous terms that help to contribute towards the bigger picture. These terms: ecological, green and sustainable are not directly associated with ethicality, but ethicality is a small step that leads to greater achievements. It is apparent that the growing trend of ethical skincare, which focuses on products that are non-toxic for the skin and for the environment, is helping to develop this idea of sustainable marketing amongst consumers. To clarify, green marketing is the application of marketing tools for facilitating exchanges to satisfy organisational goals in such a way that the preservation of the natural environment is upheld (Sharma et al., 2021, Pg 23). Whereas, sustainable marketing is defined as a macro-marketing concept where “marketing within and supportive of sustainable economic development” (Sharma et al., 2021, pg 24). One main difference between the two is that sustainable marketing is associated with a sustainable development agenda, such as maintaining sustainable relationships with customers along with the social and natural environment.

The framework proposed by Sharma et al., (2024), shows how the concept of sustainability has evolved in an academic and business context. “These concepts have given rise to the emergence of sustainable marketing under one single umbrella” (Sharma et al., 2021, pg 24). Further exemplifying that this idea of ethicality and sustainability can manifest itself in various terms and definitions, all leading up to one common goal, but having distinct methods for achieving it. Ultimately, the authors Sharma et al., (2024) help us understand that the role of brands is more important than ever, it is up to them to promote sustainable actions in their industry, whether that may be economically, socially or environmentally (Sharma et al., 2021, pg 4).



Figure 2: Evolution of Sustainability Marketing Framework

(Sharma et al., 2021, pg 24).

2.5 Chapter Summary

We close this chapter by providing ample information regarding how our literature review came to be, along with the themes and conceptualisations. Our literature review explores research conducted under our field of study, we also connect the existing research to our focus in the skincare industry. The majority of our literature was found using LUBSearch, as well as GoogleScholar, to help find practitioners and academics who have published credible journal articles, books, dissertations, as well as research studies in the fields of digital marketing and communications, national culture and how it is applied in the marketing and communications mix, culture and its relation to symbolism in branding, consumer perceptions and motivations, and lastly, sustainability marketing.

To conduct our search we used relevant keywords in various combinations to find sufficient existing research that has been conducted. The central themes and conceptual models in our review include Kim & Ko's (2010) framework on the five most effective aspects of social media activities, the three positive effects on consumer perceptions in the social media space in regards to the vegan beauty industry as discussed by Dos Santos, De Brito Silva, Da Costa, et al (2023), Hofstede's original five dimensions of national culture (Hofstede, 1994), an adaptation of Wee and Ming's (1996) Goodyear's model where we identified two out of the six stages to describe the life of a brand and Sharma et al.'s (2021) framework on the evolution of sustainability marketing.

Additionally, based on the literature review and our analysis, and in line with our research methodology, we have developed a checklist based on Miles and Huberman's (1994) checklist matrix to identify variations (Easterby-Smith et al., 2021, Pg 189). This checklist is used as an analytical framework for our research. The themes and models in our literature review prove useful to us and our research in our data analysis.

3 Methodology

This chapter describes and assesses the methodology of the research. This includes the research approach followed by the research design. Our chosen method of data collection, sampling techniques, data analysis method, and the relevance of our chosen method are described in detail. Finally, the validity, reliability and limitations of our method are discussed.

3.1 Research Approach

“Ontology is about the nature of reality and existence,” a relativist approach tells us that there are many truths and “facts depend on the viewpoints of the observer” (Easterby-Smith et al., 2021, Pg 46). This study adopts a relativist ontological approach, recognising that consumer perceptions of different ethical skincare brands can be influenced by their cultural norms, values and interpretations. With an ontological position of relativism, we recognise that national culture is potentially one of the several aspects that shape consumer perception of brands.

“Epistemology is the study of the nature of knowledge and ways of enquiring into the physical and social worlds” (Easterby-Smith et al., 2021, Pg 47). For our study, we take a social constructionist stance in agreement that societal reality is formed by people and how they make sense of the world (Easterby-Smith et al., 2021). Our epistemological approach aligns with a constructivist stance as our study acknowledges that reality is socially constructed through shared meanings, interactions and cultural contexts. As consumer perceptions tend to be subjective, typically influenced by personal experiences, social influences and cultural norms, by examining consumer perspectives through a social constructionist view, we can uncover how cultural norms, values and practices influence consumer perceptions and decision-making processes concerning their views of ethical skincare brands.

“Qualitative research is the systematic inquiry into social phenomena in natural settings. These phenomena can include but are not limited to, how people experience aspects of their lives, how individuals or groups behave, how organisations function and how interactions shape relationships” (Teherani et al., 2015). Qualitative methods are pieces of non-numerical data such as interviews, focus groups and secondary data that allow for an in-depth

exploration of consumer perspectives (Easterby-Smith et al., 2021). This research aims to determine if national culture plays a role in consumer perceptions through a comparative case study of three ethical skincare brands. We have taken a qualitative research approach by using secondary textual data and conducting semi-structured interviews with participants who have lived in a national culture on a long-term basis.

3.2 Research Design

In this section, we outline a qualitative approach that integrates semi-structured interviews and secondary textual data analysis to comprehensively investigate consumer perceptions of ethical skincare brands in a digital world.

Qualitative interviews are a way to uncover, reflect and understand the perspectives and reasonings of a phenomenon by having direct conversations with participants, where their personal experiences and information can flourish (Easterby-Smith et al., 2021). For this reason, we decided as researchers that interviews would be most useful for us to begin to understand the consumer perceptions of participants from diverse national cultures.

Before the interview process, our participants needed to be involved in some form of participation with the brands. We established that an interaction period of three days for the three skincare brands in our research would help facilitate our participants to form an opinion and understand the type of content, stories and reels that are posted on their Instagram pages. Considering our participants are busy individuals with their own lives to attend to, we determined that three days is enough time for a participant to understand what the brand is about. A five-day interaction period would have proven most effective because it builds a longer relationship with the participant. Even so, we considered three days adequate time.

To incentivise participation in our study, we offered participants a chance to win a twenty-dollar skincare voucher, chosen at random, for a participant to use on any of the three brands they observed. By doing this, we hoped participants would be more interested in the content posted by these three brands considering they could be future consumers of the brands. The selection of our twenty global participants is explained in further detail in our data-collection method.

After our global participants had been chosen, they interacted and observed content posted on the Instagram pages of our selected skincare brands over a three-day period. A requirement for our study was for participants to follow and turn on post-notifications for these three brands, ensuring that they would never miss a post. This interactive phase allows participants to engage with brand messaging and cultural representations, forming their opinions on each

brand at the end of every day. We encouraged our participants to write one sentence about something they noticed or had caused an impression on them, which could then help guide them in the interviews later on, however, we made it clear that this was not mandatory.

After a three-day observation, a phone call interview was conducted on the fourth day. We decided to follow through with a mediated interview, in which interviews are not conducted in a physical face-to-face manner but through other media, such as phone calls (Easterby-Smith et al., 2021). This mediated interview allowed us to further accommodate our global participants and allowed us the flexibility to schedule interviews around their schedules.

Before beginning the interview, participants were informed of the question we aimed to answer, how long their data would be used and that they have the right to withdraw at any point. We then sent them a consent form which they had to sign and send back to us, this consent form was retrieved through LUSEM's website concerning personal data and consent. The semi-structured interviews allowed us to gather detailed insights into participants' experiences, attitudes and behaviours towards the chosen brands.

Furthermore, one of the first essential questions we asked our participants was what the national culture is of the place they have resided in, or are currently residing in, long-term. We define long-term as someone who has lived in a country for at least five years. Considering that living in a place for five continuous years grants access to residents to apply for permanent resident status, we thought this was an adequate time to consider someone a member of a national culture (SULF, 2024).

Our following question was to ask the participant how connected they felt to their national culture. We determined this was important to ask because it helped us decide if their responses could be used in our research or not. If the participant felt as if they resonated to some extent with their national culture, then this would imply they have some experience with the type of marketing and communications that is present within that national culture, proving to be an effective way of understanding our research question. If the participant has resided in a country long-term but is entirely unaware of the type of content and communications present, and they feel as if they are more aware of another country or national culture, this would fall within the boundaries of cross-cultural communications, in which case opens up another direction of research to be conducted and is not directly applicable to the question we aim to answer.

As researchers, we wanted to gather participants who are knowledgeable in the marketing and communications of their own national culture, even so, we are aware that other influences can come into play at any given time. For this reason, another one of our interview questions asked if they had been exposed to marketing and communications of skincare products from

their national culture, and if not, which culture they *tend* to see the most from, just to get a better understanding of the factors that may influence our participants.

In addition to our interviews, we used the analysis of company promotional material and website content. Our textual data complements our topic on how different skincare brands market and communicate their skincare products. It allows for a comprehensive analysis of the selected brands messaging and communications across their digital platforms (Easterby-Smith, et al., 2021).

3.3 Data Collection Method

Data collection is the process of systematically gathering and measuring information to enable the answering of research questions, testing of hypotheses and evaluation of outcomes (The Office of Research Integrity, 2024). “Before adopting any method of data collection, it helps to be clear about the overall objectives of the research,” (Easterby-Smith et al., 2021, Pg 138). In considering our main research objective which is to find out *if* and *how* cultural factors influence consumer perceptions of ethical brands, our interview questions were formulated to help stimulate conversation on our research topic. Through the interactive research done on the participant’s behalf, the participant acted as an observer and they were able to make notes on the Instagram activities that occurred within the given three-day period. The secondary textual data, “data such as videos from the internet or photographs taken for purposes other than research” (Easterby-Smith et al., 2021, Pg 130), presents the initial first impressions of what each ethical skincare brand stands for and how they choose to represent themselves. Although the participants were not required to research each brand’s websites beforehand, nor did they know which national culture belonged to each skincare brand, the responses to their interview questions helped to better understand the impact of each brand’s media presence and provided us insights on whether the message the brand tells on their main websites is a direct representation of what they choose to post on their Instagram pages.

For our semi-structured interviews, we selected twenty global participants through purposive sampling, with no restrictions on gender. We sought participants from various national cultures to understand how different cultures vary in their responses and to have a better understanding of the similarities and differences present in the marketing and communications of these three brands. One of the only requirements was that the participants had to be between the ages of 18 to 30 and that they spend a substantial amount of time on Instagram as a social media platform, in which they tend to search for and follow brands. Our chosen sampling method, as discussed by Easterby-Smith, et al. (2021), allowed us researchers to find sample members that met our initial criteria. This sampling technique then led to

snowball sampling, in which our participants asked their friends to participate as well. The snowball sampling technique allowed us to find participants that we would not have otherwise known to reach (Easterby-Smith, et al., 2021). Additionally, we chose the ages of 18 to 30 as our target demographic as they mostly fall within the Gen Z and Millennial bracket. Due to the nature of our study, they are known for being digital natives considered inclusive consumers who are “socially progressive” and demand diversity, sustainability and green practices (McKinsey, 2023). Because this demographic is highly accustomed to consuming content online, this benefits our study and helps brands who aim to develop their target marketing strategies resonate with this influential demographic.

Participants were then asked open-ended questions which acted as a guide towards understanding the participants' observations on the selected brands, their perceptions, and their interpretations of the brand content they encountered. To develop and explore emerging themes and insights further, a laddering technique was used in certain questions, to help seek examples of the participants' statements. However, this was used with caution, as we wanted our participants to not feel we were badgering them for more (Easterby-Smith, et al., 2021), we wanted the participants to be as comfortable as possible, providing them with a space where honest answers can develop.

Table 1: Summary of participants

No	Pseudonym	Country	Age	Duration
1	Anna	Netherlands	19	20 min
2	Jane	Netherlands	28	11 min
3	Donny	Canada	26	11 min
4	Emily	Japan	25	17 min
5	Faith	Nigeria	27	12 min
6	Mario	Italy	22	20 min
7	Simon	Colombia	27	18 min
8	Stephanie	Albania	25	17 min
9	Scarlett	United States	30	21 min
10	Thomas	India	26	17 min
11	Yannis	Saudi Arabia	23	15 min
12	Erica	Greece	30	16 min

13	Aaron	United States	23	17 min
14	Daniel	Nigeria	25	25 min
15	Sophie	England	25	28 min
16	Queen	Nigeria	24	17 min
17	Chelsea	United States	24	17 min
18	Lilliana	Italy	26	16 min
19	Ebba	Sweden	26	16 min
20	Janet	South Africa	25	10 min

To understand the data collected concerning Hofstede’s five original dimensions of national culture and whether it is in alignment with the national culture of our respondents, we used Hofstede’s Insights Country comparison tool (2024). Although this tool uses numerical values to determine how high or low national cultures are within the constraints of Hofstede’s dimensions, we use this data to help understand our participant’s national culture with the five dimensions and to *qualitatively* answer the question of whether national culture plays a role in consumer perception. This tool allows us to make systematic inferences about the transcribed interviews we have collected.

3.4 Data Analysis

In international marketing research, analysing textual data from interviews proves to be essential to better understanding how consumers from different markets behave (Sinkovics, Penz and Ghauri, 2005). To begin analysing the data, we use the content analysis approach with our checklist matrix of pre-existing theories identified in our literature review and Hofstede’s five original dimensions of national culture. To conduct our content analysis, as researchers we must first determine the criteria for the selection of the relevant material in our data (Easterby-Smith et al., 2021). Using the checklist matrix and factors that the theory in our literature has determined we assess whether the answers of our participants indicate the presence or absence of the pre-existing theories.

As described by Easterby-Smith et al. (2021), these matrix tables can assist in counting the occurrence of when a particular theme presents itself, facilitating a better understanding for us researchers in the analysis portion. Additionally, we paid special attention to the participants who felt that they did resonate with their national culture. Those who did not feel strongly

connected were still analysed and understood, but we wanted to note those who have had strong personal experiences. We also decided to group participants who came from the same national culture to understand commonalities and differences.

Our interview questions to the participants were not *direct* questions in regards to what they thought of Hofstede's cultural dimensions; or where their country would place on that scale. We decided to take a different approach to answering our national culture question. Through this comparative case study of three different brands from three different countries, we wanted to interpret the data given to us to answer the question; instead of asking the participants for straightforward answers to the national culture phenomenon.

Further, we transcribed all the data in real time. Our interviewees were patient and aware that their answers were being written in the present moment. Once gathering all the transcriptions of the interviews into one document, we were allowed to read through them and establish different themes using the checklist matrix in *Table 2*. Through this sorting process, we identified seven themes of our participants' insights and responses to our interview questions.

In total, we had 20 participants, with a representation of 14 countries, as seen in *Table 1*. These countries include The Netherlands, Canada, Japan, Nigeria, Italy, Colombia, Albania, the United States, India, Saudi Arabia, Greece, the United Kingdom, Sweden and South Africa. With 20 interviews having been conducted overall, it is important to note that in our analysis, we made use of quotes and samples from 17 of our participants, as we had reached empirical saturation from many of the responses. Even so, all 20 interview samples were relevant and useful to our study. The use of real individuals presented us with a representative sample of the type of perceptions and behaviour that exist within these national cultures.

3.5 Ethical considerations

“Informed consent and the right to confidentiality are just as important for management and business research” (Easterby-Smith, et al., 2021, Pg 122). In this study, we ensured when carrying out our qualitative research that all participants had consented to the use of their information, the purpose of the study and interviews. Furthermore, we used pseudonyms to further protect their privacy in presenting the results. Participants were clear that the information concerning their opinions and observations given during the research was being written, therefore, no information that is likely to harm their interests as individuals has been noted. Concerning the brands we have chosen to observe and analyse, for our study, we have used information that is readily available to the public online. We also ensured that interview questions were communicated clearly, so participants understood what was being asked. As for choosing the winner of our skincare voucher, all the participants' names were inputted into

a guessing machine, which we found online, and we let this website choose our winner at random. The participant was then awarded a skincare voucher for their preferred skincare brand out of the three brands.

3.6 Validity and Reliability

“Content analysis is a social scientific methodology that requires researchers who use it to make a strong case for the validity and reliability of their data” (Potter and Donnerstein, 1999). In conducting data collection for our research, we wanted to ensure our qualitative process was as reliable as possible. Over the three days of interaction, participants observed content across all brands on different days based on their convenience. This meant they likely saw different content being posted on different days and not the same ones. However, participants were also asked to give their general thoughts on the marketing and communications of each of the three brands. This meant they could also consider other content posted on different days. We encouraged our participants to take notes on each day of their observation to help keep the memory of certain key ideas or impressions they might have had.

Furthermore, participants of the study were also interviewed on different days based on their convenience and schedule. However, to ensure validity, they were all given the same interview questions. During the interviews, in some cases, participants did not have an opinion on what they thought about certain cultures regarding skincare. So they gave generalised answers on their conceptions of said culture. However, in most cases, participants were given clarifying questions so they could better understand the questions they were asked.

Some of the major sources of error in research can be the subjects participating in the study (Brink, 1993). Although we asked our participants and sent daily email reminders at the end of each day, we also have to account for differences in time zones, this could mean that some participants might not have observed the same content at the same time. Furthermore, in some cases, a few of the participants admitted to not viewing the content for three consecutive days and sometimes forgot to view the content until the next day. These participants were also allowed to view the content and go back to it during the interviews, to help them recall some of what they had observed.

“The researcher can attempt to increase the validity of responses by making sure that informants are very clear on the nature of the research eg. why the researcher is there, the study, data collection and what will be done with it” (Brink, 1993). At the start of our data collection process, participants were given information on what the research entails, information on the study as well as the final interview. This was also written on the consent forms sent out and signed by the participants.

Although some scholars such as Brink (1993) state that to increase validity, interviewing the same informant on several occasions, at different times, and different locations is advised, it was not realistic for this study due to time constraints as well as availability.

Ultimately, our research is based on a comparative case study of three different brands from three different countries, meaning that we are studying a phenomenon that is occurring in a very specific context: the ethical skincare industry. Although our research can be useful for other industries, and may even be transferable, as discussed by Easterby-Smith et al., (2021), most phenomena have unique features to them, making it difficult to make them generalizable for other fields.

3.7 Limitations

In regards to our methodology, we initially thought it would be best to conduct a focus group in which we demonstrate secondary textual and visual data of the websites and advertisements of each brand, and then allow an open discussion of national culture regarding consumer perceptions. We then realised due to our globally-based participants and our desire to have as many different national cultures participate in our study, it is difficult to conduct a focus group in which all the participants were able to be physically present. Other methodology possibilities included netnographic data collection, however, considering the abundance of influencers and influencer marketing that is paid content to promote products, we wanted to produce authentic encounters with our participants.

Our mediated interviews via a phone call were one of our best options to cater towards our global participants. A limitation of these remote interviews was that we could not officially hold every interview on the fourth day, following the interactive three-day period of the brand. Due to the schedule constraints of our participants, we had to be flexible with their availability. Although many participants were able to have the phone call interview on the fourth day, others had to be accommodated to another day that was more convenient for them.

Additionally, a handful of our participants had a 20-minute time constraint, in which we interviewed between their work or lunch breaks. In *Table 1: Summary of Participants*, some participants went over the initial 20-minute limit, as researchers, the more time our participants gave us, the better, because this ensures more detailed responses and a further understanding of their national culture. This is why some participants are seen to have had a longer interview time in comparison to others.

Furthermore, there could be room for improvement with a larger sample size of participants from more national cultures. For example, there is a low representation of Asian individuals

in our research, and it would be interesting to note how perceptions influence consumers from that region. Ideally, we wanted to gather more participants from different cultures, however, due to the nature of our study and the time that our participants had to dedicate to their interaction period, many potential participants turned down the study as it did not work around their schedule. Even so, the 20 participants in our study helped us reach saturation. As our interviews and transcripts developed, we began to receive similar responses to the current question we are exploring.

3.8 Chapter Summary

This chapter has given an overview of the methodology and research approach we have followed during our research. We have given an overview of the qualitative approach of our study, including details on how the observations and interviews have been carried out. Our data collection and analysis methods have been explained, and a summary of our participants, their country, age and duration of interviews. Furthermore, we have explained our data collection methods in alignment with Hofstede's five original dimensions of national culture and how we have chosen to group the countries used in our research and that of our participant's national culture. We have also presented our considerations such as ethical practices, validity and reliability, and limitations of our study. In the following section, we analyse the data given to us.

4 Results

In line with our adapted checklist, in Table 2 we analyse the material available to us from our interviews and research findings.

Table 2: Checklist Matrix: Linking of evident pre-existing theories and emerging themes in comparison with data.

Pre-existing theories	Emerging Themes	Data from Participants
Effectiveness of social media: Entertainment, interaction, customisation, trendiness and word-of-mouth (Kim & Ko, 2010)	Preferred Content	<p><i>Strong:</i> 8 participants had a strong preference towards informational/interactive content</p> <p><i>Moderate:</i> 4 participants preferred Instagram reels & 3 preferred content using the product</p> <p><i>Low:</i> 2 participants had no preference & 1 participant preferred student branding</p>
Brand Symbolism & Personality, Tan and Ming (2003)	Simplicity	<p><i>Moderate:</i> 7 Participants mentioned a preference towards brands with simple products and branding, similar to their own culture.</p> <p><i>Low:</i> Only 2 participants felt strongly about the simple skincare routine in their culture.</p>
Hofstede's Original Five Dimensions of National Culture (1994)	Sense of Familiarity, Adaptability, Simplicity, Targeting vs. Inclusivity, Accessibility and country of origin	<i>Strong:</i> 14 countries represented (14 national cultures)

<p>Wee and Ming's (1996) Goodyear's Model on Life of a Brand</p>	<p>Adaptability</p>	<p>Out of the 3 participants with Nigerian national culture: <i>Strong</i> 2 out of 3 prefer Arami Essentials</p> <p>Out of 3 participants with American national culture <i>Strong</i> 2 out of 3 prefer Good Molecules</p> <p><i>Strong</i> 1 out of 1 Swedish participant preferred Ida Warg Beauty</p>
<p>Sharma et al.'s (2021) Framework on the Evolution of Sustainability Marketing</p>	<p>Sustainability</p>	<p><i>Low</i>: 1 participant cares about having sustainable and ethical product packaging</p> <p><i>Low</i>: 1 participant did not have any opinions on ethical skincare</p> <p><i>Strong</i>: 10 participants do not purchase skincare from an ethical brand, nor consider it important</p> <p><i>Moderate</i>: 8 participants prefer to purchase ethical skincare and consider it important</p>
<p>Country of Origin Effect (Supanvanij and Amine, 2000)</p>	<p>Targeting vs Inclusivity</p>	<p><i>Low</i>: 1 participant strongly stated preferences for EU-regulated products</p>
<p>Source Credibility Theory (Kelman, 1961)</p>	<p>Sense of Familiarity</p>	<p><i>Low</i>: 3 participants said word of mouth, referrals or reviews were important considerations for them</p> <p><i>Low</i>: 2 participants referred to being influenced by influencer marketing</p>

		<i>Low</i> : 2 participants mentioned liking user-generated Content
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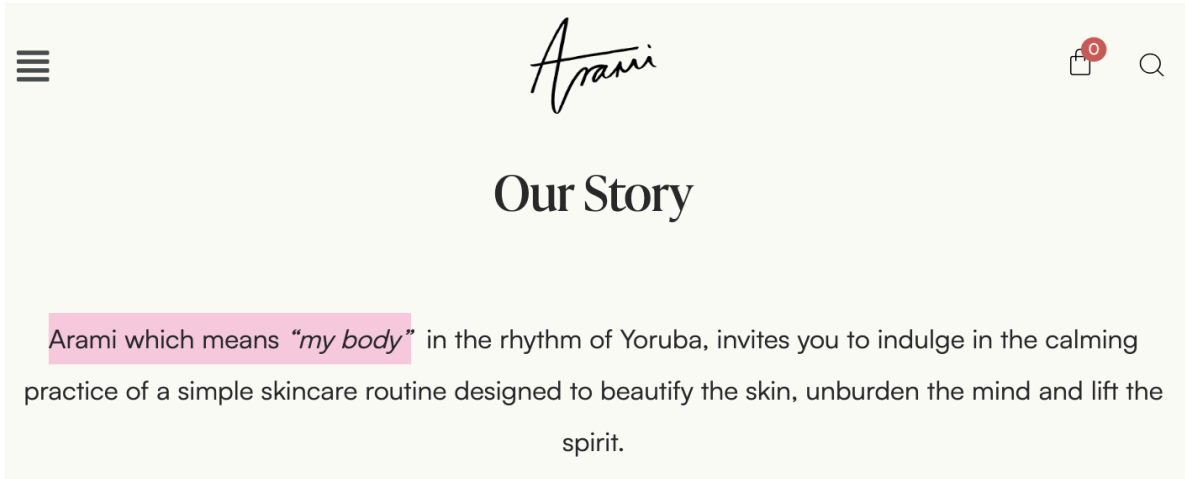
4.1 Findings

4.1.1 Marketing Strategies of Each Brand

Arami Essentials

The marketing strategy of the Nigerian brand Arami Essentials is focused on clean beauty, simplicity and a personal touch. This is shown with the use of unedited, clear and mostly user-generated photos. The models used on the page wear little to no makeup. Most of the photos used are not taken by a professional photographer which tells us they want consumers to be aware that clear skin is attainable with the use of their products. The brand makes use of notable holidays in their strategy such as Mother's Day and Earth Day, creating and building their campaigns around these important world events. Furthermore, the founder of the company is visible, as she appears in numerous campaigns, and other marketing materials on the Instagram page as well as their website.

Additionally, the brand is intent on promoting its packaging, which is sustainable and heat resistant, this is an essential marketing tactic considering the high temperatures in Nigeria, and their emphasis on protecting the product from any outside sources. Phrases like “Your body is a temple” are commonly used on the page as well as motivational and zen-like quotes (Arami Essentials, 2023). As written on their website, Arami Essentials ships to all countries around the world, meaning that they are considered global, however, it appears their target audience is consumers of darker skin tones, as seen on their promotions. Lastly, Arami Essentials has the most social media reach with a presence on Instagram, X, YouTube, TikTok, Facebook, and Pinterest (Arami Essentials, 2023). Their official website consists of videos and pictures of models demonstrating their natural beauty.



Ore’s vision is for Arami to become a key player in positioning Nigeria and wider African continent at the forefront of the global beauty industry & positively impact the lives of the female farmers at the centre of the Africa’s resource supply chain. Ore is passionate about building Arami as a sustainable beauty brand through Arami Earth and giving back to the community through Mind Body Soul.

Figure 3: Arami Essentials’ Meaning & Vision (Arami Essentials, 2023)

"Environmentally Conscious"

RECYCLE, REFILL, REUSE.

2018
We began by encouraging customers to recycle at least 10 empties with us for a discount

2019
We launched our first product in glass, Joy Oil, with an immediate refill option (in-store or mail back)

2021
We released a glass option of Eden's Elixir, alongside a refill pouch

We extended our recycling program out to community ambassadors, with the creation of Arami Earth Affiliates.

We launched another product in our glass dropper bottles, HLR Drops, with an immediate refill option (in-store or mail back)

2022
Our community had long been asking for a jumbo sized version our best selling Glow Oil. So we brought out a 500ml bottle that is made of recycled plastic.

We released a glass option of Glow Oil, alongside a 1 litre refill pouch

Our first face moisturiser in specially designed refillable packaging

Figure 4: Sustainability Initiative (Arami Essentials, 2023)

Join our loyalty program to earn rewards with every purchase you make. To receive & redeem your points, make sure you're signed in to your account with us.

SIGN UP

Figure 5: Consumer Representation (Arami Essentials, 2023)

Good Molecules

American brand, Good Molecule's marketing strategy is to promote their affordable skincare products with the use of numerous partnerships and collaborations with other brands and influencers. The brand wants to show that they have a wide range of products for every skin type, colour or problem area. The majority of the content posted on their social media page is user-generated, which helps to give potential consumers the idea that their products are used by a wide variety of consumers, from different countries and skin colours. Good Molecules has a social media presence consisting of Instagram, TikTok, X, and Pinterest (GoodMolecules, 2024), they use their official website to have a multitude of pictures displaying their products, while also demonstrating photos of real consumers backing the products' effectiveness.

GoodMolecules tends to emphasise this idea of the real consumer, with their website having little to no pictures of models. Their webpage even promotes this "skincare quiz," which grants the consumer the possibility of finding out what would work best for their skin type (GoodMolecules, 2024), further exemplifying this phenomenon of the more knowledgeable consumer. Their marketing tends to be fun, colourful and playful, leaning into social media trends and events, while making it educational on how consumers can use their products to achieve better results, such as glowing skin. Good Molecules shows their products featured in local stores such as Target, and Ulta, which gives local consumers in the United States the idea that they are incredibly accessible to them. They also use different types of content such as videos, photos, and infographics. Although the majority of the content appears to be taken with the use of a smartphone, there are some professionally taken photos of their products. Good Molecules offers worldwide shipping, enabling consumers from all over the world to shop for their products.

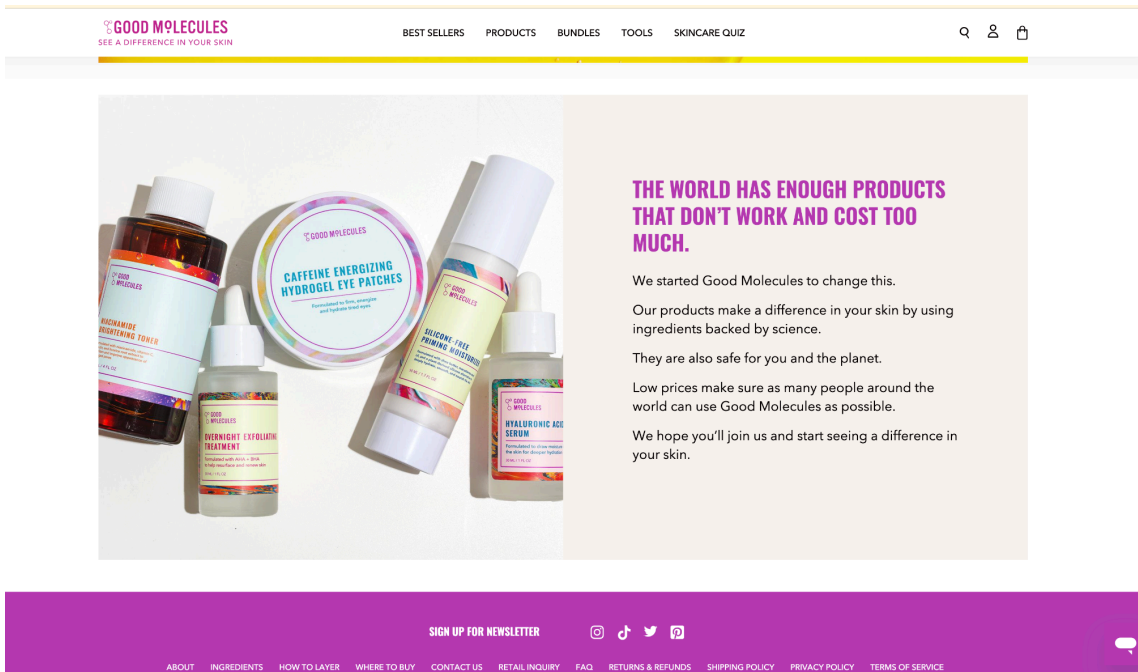


Figure 6: Good Molecules Website (Good Molecules, 2024).

DESCRIPTION **HOW TO USE** **INGREDIENTS**

Help reveal smoother, firmer-looking skin with this gentle, fragrance-free retinol treatment from Good Molecules. Formulated with 0.1% retinol, Gentle Retinol Cream helps to improve the appearance of fine lines, wrinkles, and lack of elasticity. Nourishing, soothing ingredients help to hydrate and minimize dryness and irritation.

Other Details

- Size: 30 ml / 1 fl oz
- pH: 6
- Cruelty-free
- Vegan
- Fragrance-free

Figure 7: Example of Ethical Stance Good Molecules Product Descriptions (Good Molecules, 2024)

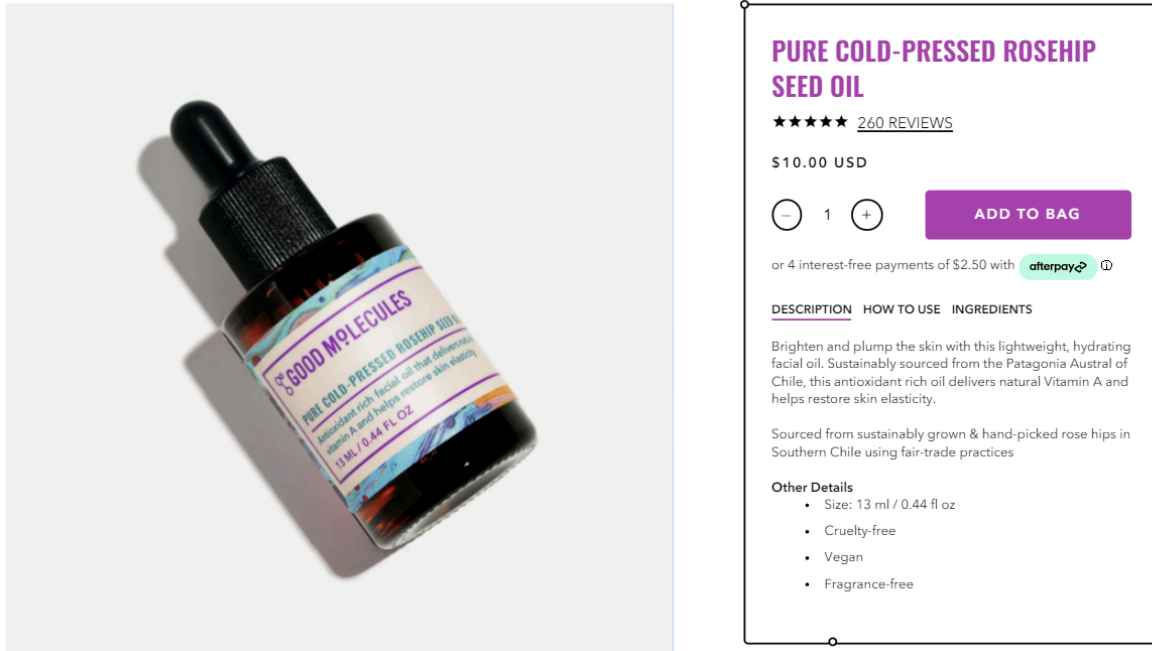


Figure 8: Example of a product with descriptive ethical attributes (Good Molecules, 2024)

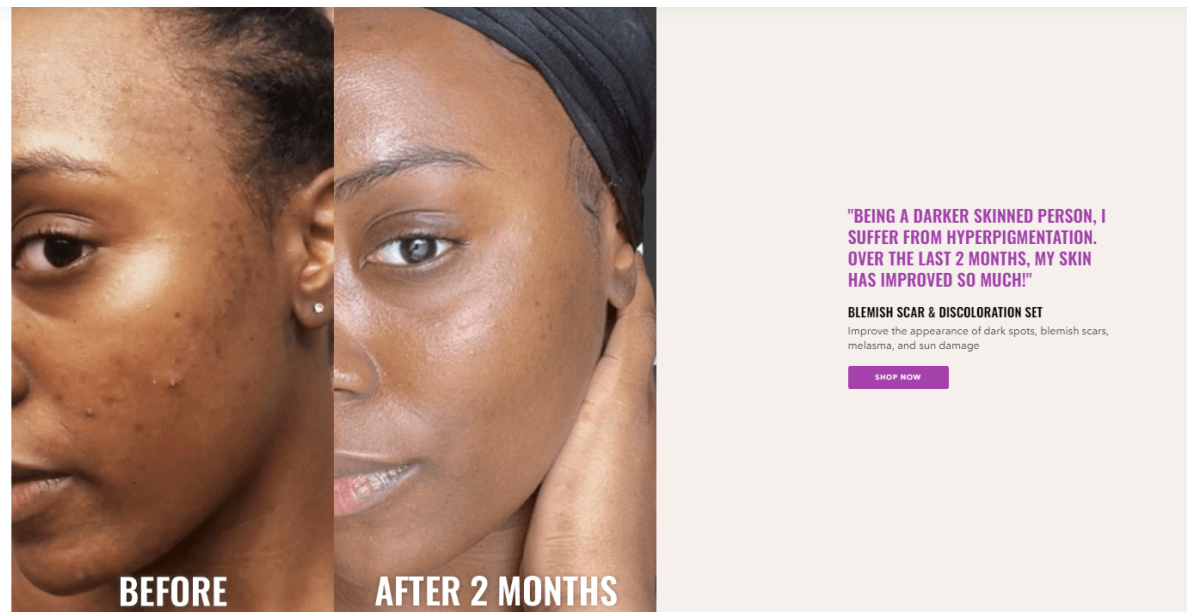


Figure 9: Representation of real consumers (Good Molecules, 2024)

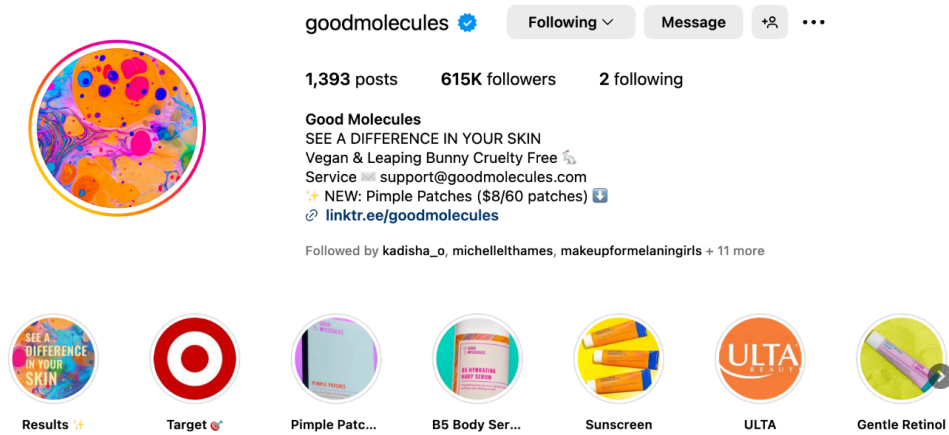


Figure 10: Good Molecules Instagram page (Instagram, 2024)

Ida Warg Beauty

Ida Warg Beauty markets a variety of beauty products such as skincare, body care, fragrances, makeup and hair. However, their tanning products take on a central role in their marketing strategy. The brand makes use of instructional videos, like product demonstrations, and before and afters to show how their products work. They include collaborations with non-profit organisations that show their dedication to being a socially responsible brand. The brand tends to collaborate with Swedish content creators, however, most of the content they use for their social media comes from the brand themselves instead of users. Based on the information on their website, Ida Warg Beauty only ships to countries within the European Union. Ida Warg Beauty has a further reach on digital platforms, by having a social media presence on Facebook, Instagram, Pinterest, Youtube and LinkedIn (Ida Warg Beauty, 2024), the brand chooses to keep their website concise and they tend to stray away from having pictures or videos of people or models, they solely have pictures of their products on their main site. They make a notable statement on their website regarding their sustainability initiatives in which they even encourage the consumer to contact them via their email, for any concerns or ideas on how they can improve their sustainability efforts (Ida Warg Beauty, 2024).



idawarg

Follow

Message



4,990 posts

293K followers

712 following

Ida Warg

My Beauty Brand @idawargbeauty

Renovation project @byjoliemaision

POSTS

REELS

TAGGED

Figure 11: Ida Warg Beauty's Founder (Instagram, 2024)

ALWAYS 100% VEGAN & CRUELTY-FREE

BODY CARE

SEK ▾

SWEDISH ▾

IDAWARG
BEAUTY

SUSTAINABILITY

Since our business affects the environment, it is important that IDA WARG Beauty makes responsible choices for a better future. We strive to run our company in a sustainable and responsible way by working with *environmental, social and governance issues*. We continuously strive to improve and integrate more sustainable working methods in all parts of the organization.

Products

We strive to develop products of the highest quality. Our ingredients are carefully selected and are fully traceable. All our products are 100% vegan and cruelty-free.

Production/partners

We strive to work mainly with local manufacturers in Sweden and Europe, and to reduce our carbon footprint. We believe that it is natural to only work with certified manufacturers, we set high standards and we have high expectations of our suppliers.

Packaging

By continuously trying to improve and modernize our packaging, we work to reduce the amount of plastic and choose sustainable alternatives for paper.

Matters of the heart

It is important for us to get involved in issues that we are passionate about. We support and participate in organizations like 2helpinghands that do fantastic work for refugees. It is an obvious choice for us to support the Breast Cancer Association by running sales for donations during the month of October. We support Unizon's incredible work for women and children. We also support Ellashjältar, Musikhjälpen and the Ronald McDonald house.

Figure 12: Ida Warg Sustainability Statement (Ida Warg Beauty, 2024)



Figure 13: Product Representation (Ida Warg Beauty, 2024)

4.1.2 Link to Cultural Heritage

Brands tend to link their cultural heritage to their name and cultural heritage is used to form their identity as seen in one of our case study brands from Nigeria, Arami Essentials, where the brand name means “my body” in the Yoruba language (Figure 3). In many cases, consumers from cultures like Nigeria are proud of their cultural heritage and this is reflected in brands who wish to reach these audiences. Scholars, like Kapferer, believe that a brand is culture and culture is the most important element in a brands personality (Unurlu and Uca, 2017), so by choosing a name that connects to the culture and the local audiences, certain brands are able to differentiate themselves from foreign competitors and directly connect with the consumers they want to reach.

Similarly, in the case of Ida Warg Beauty, the brand is named after the founder Ida Warg (Figure 11). From her Instagram page, it is clear that Warg is a popular Swedish content creator and influencer who has built her career through her blogs and YouTube videos. For this reason, Ida Warg Beauty can be referred to as a founders brand, which is a brand that is directly linked to its founder helping to build on authenticity through personal connection and heritage. Consumers therefore tend to perceive a more genuine brand, especially if the brand is tied to a person they recognize and are familiar with. This allows for easy brand recollection, as the founder Ida Warg, has amassed a large following of over 293,000 followers as seen in figure 11. Consumers also connect with these types of brands that help to create their own individual identities and lifestyles through the brands, making them feel better connected to their national identity if they choose to purchase it (Mohamed, Ünsalan & Abdinasir, 2024).

Our third case study brand Good Molecules differs from the other two brands. The brand achieves this by firstly not being directly linked to a cultural heritage through its mission and strategies. As seen in figure 6, Good Molecules' vision is to ensure they are globally ready and available, the brand does this by using low prices. Because their strategy is assuming a global culture versus a national culture, linkage to a cultural heritage does not benefit their marketing strategy. Furthermore, American culture is typically considered mainstream which is largely due to the global influence American culture has had on media, brands and fast-food chains, which makes it more accessible and familiar to people around the world. Even so, it does not change the fact that Good Molecules was established in the United States, meaning that their strategies have some degree of American influence. In contrast to Good Molecules, we see that Arami Essentials vision is to “position Nigeria and the wider African continent as the forefront of the global beauty industry” (figure 3) therefore, their vision shapes their identity to their cultural heritage, resulting in a clear and enhanced image for the consumer (Jian et al., 2019).

4.1.3 Clear Ethical Stance

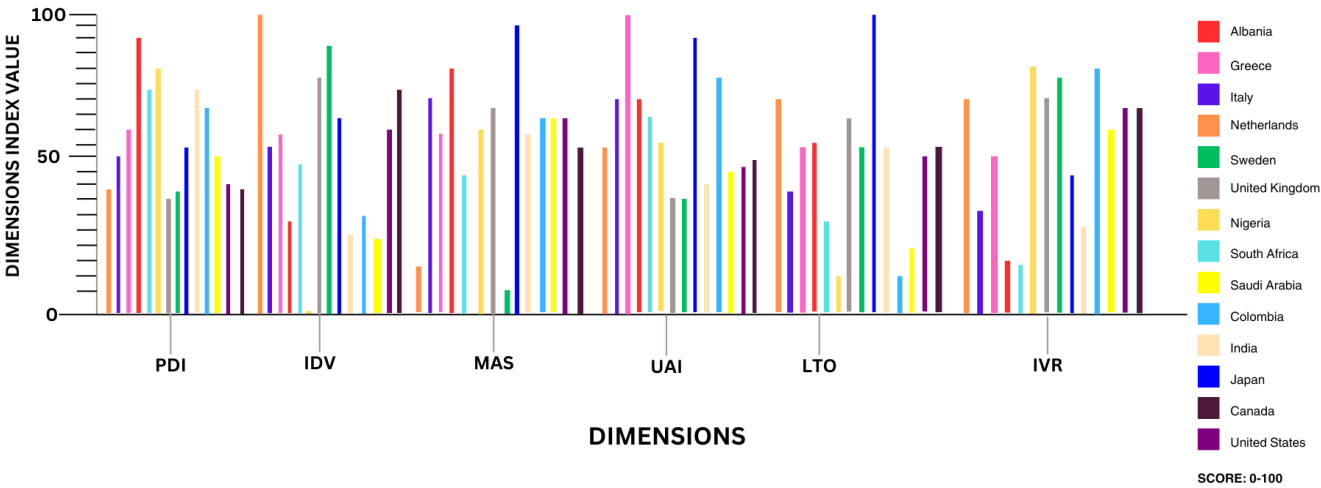
Brands operating in a market where consumers have concerns about ethics and values, such as the skincare industry, have to make clear ethical stances. This can be seen in Figure 4, with the Arami Essentials sustainability initiative, with the brand stating that they “make conscious decisions,” promoting the fact that their bottles are reusable for life. Additionally, consumers can purchase their product with refills, send the empty bottles back and get it refilled for a 10% discount (figure 4). This is particularly important as academics believe that the recyclability of products is only important if a brand promotes ethical disposal of their products as well (McDonald and Oates, 2006). This information on their website positions Arami Essentials as a brand that cares about the earth, the planet and its people, helping consumers to form better perceptions of them (figure 4).

Similarly, Ida Warg Beauty has a clear sustainability statement on their website, (figure 12) “We strive to run our company in a sustainable and responsible way by working with environmental, social and governance issues” this statement is particularly important for Swedish brands as 72% of Swedish consumers confirm that sustainability influences their purchasing decisions (Rönholm, 2022). Therefore, consumers in Sweden want Swedish brands to meet their sustainability expectations. Furthermore, Good Molecules, unlike the other brands, does not have any clear sustainability initiatives on their website. They make it clear in their product descriptions that their products are cruelty-free, with no animal testing and vegan, this is emphasised on their Instagram page.

This clear ethical stance employed by the brands builds upon Mai's (2014) research in which the author discusses the power of labels in the field of ethicality. The Good Molecules brand

is a prime example of a brand that uses ethical attributes to describe its product, in figure 8, we see an image of a pure cold-pressed rosehip seed oil, that has been described as being sustainably grown and hand-picked from Chile using fair-trade practices. Although Good Molecules lacks in their sustainability report and initiatives, they are strong in their descriptions of their products. They are indicating to their consumers that they are in alignment with their ethical preferences and they are using marketing tactics to highlight the ethical attributes of their products, as discussed by Mai (2014).

4.1.4 Our Participants' Countries Using Hofstede's Country Comparison Tool



This country comparison tool provided to us by Hofstede's Insights (2024), was useful in allowing us to formulate our own bar chart to further interpret the national cultural dimensions present within the 14 countries of which our participants have resided on a long-term basis. The index values scores were qualitatively interpreted to understand the cultural foundations of our participants.

4.2 How the Marketing and Communications from the Three Brands Were Perceived

4.2.1 Sense of Familiarity

To begin, our participant from Albania, with the pseudonym Stephanie, felt that out of the three brands she had to interact with, she resonated the most with the Good Molecules brand.

As researchers, we wanted to understand how this American culture compares and contrasts with the Albanian national culture.

From what we understood earlier in our literature review, as well as the country comparison graphs in our findings, Albania and the United States tend to have differing stances when it comes to: power distance, individualism vs. collectivism and uncertainty avoidance (Hofstede's Insights, 2024). However, in regards to masculinity vs. femininity and long-term vs short-term orientation, these two cultures seem to be in correlation with each other. Although the values of the dimensions are slightly different, Albania scores very high in masculinity, meanwhile the United States is considered moderately high (Hofstede's Insights, 2024), but they are still close enough to be considered similar in our eyes.

Our participant Stephanie claimed to be strongly connected to her Albanian culture. Through her interview, we began to understand the reasonings behind her responses. When it came to brand exposure and whether she had heard of any of the three brands before this research, she recalled the Good Molecules brand. Interestingly enough, this sense of familiarity can be attributed to the two similarities present in the societies of the United States and Albania. Considering they are both masculine societies with a tendency towards instant gratification, as researchers we can infer that they are very goal-oriented and decisive in their decision-making process, in other words, they know what they like. In describing the Good Molecules marketing messages that she saw during those three days, she described this sense of familiarity:

The content [Good Molecules posted] was familiar to me, I am used to seeing those types of reels and posts. (Stephanie, Interview, 6 May 2024)

When it came to Ida Warg Beauty and Arami Essentials, our participant stated generally that she liked the brand and product representation, however, when it came to people representation, Ida Warg Beauty fell short and Arami Essentials did not fully satisfy the type of content she likes to see:

They [Ida Warg Beauty] were engaging, but not many people present, just the product. (Stephanie, Interview, 6 May 2024).

I noticed that they [Arami Essentials] did not post much, I wish I knew more about what they are up to, it felt very surface-level content (Stephanie, Interview, 6 May 2024).

In regards to our interview question on whether our participants felt seen or targeted by the brand at any time during the interaction period, our interviewee stated that out of the three brands, she only felt targeted by the Good Molecules brand; specifically because of their informational content along with their usage of real models that display their skin concerns and differing skin types. Stephanie then made it clear that she would feel motivated to

purchase from the Good Molecules brand because she trusts where the product is made, as she states:

If it is a product that I can not purchase from Albania then I will not engage with it (Stephanie Interview, 6 May 2024)

Our participant had not realised during her interaction period that Ida Warg Beauty and Arami Essentials are global skincare brands with shipping available to her country, proving that these brands do not make it clear in their marketing messages and communication that they are available to all.

Additionally, our participant supported the communication method established by Kelman (1961) in which the source credibility theory yields positive effects on consumer perceptions. When we asked our participant on their exposure to marketing messages of their Albanian national culture our participant expressed:

I follow most of the skincare pages from Albania on Instagram. I want to stay up to date on the brand and what the influencers are selling. The states are also a huge part of the marketing I see on my page and algorithm as well. (Stephanie, Interview, 6 May 2024).

Later on, she emphasises:

I trust American skincare influencers (Stephanie, Interview, 6 May 2024).

Proving that her conceptions of her Albanian culture, and what she knew of the American culture manifested themselves into familiarity and trustworthiness, possibly leading her into associating with the brand she felt the most comfortable with.

4.2.2 Adaptability

Our participants from Nigeria: Faith, Daniel and Queen, have stated their connection to their national culture, along with growing accustomed to the people there. While Daniel and Queen preferred the brand Arami Essentials, Faith preferred Good Molecules over the rest.

Reflecting on the adaptation of Goodyear's model (1996), Wee and Ming (2003) contribute to our research with two out of their six stages. As the authors discuss, when marketers introduce symbolic values and meanings to the brand, many times a brand's personality can begin to link itself to emotional appeal and meanings (Wee & Ming, 2003), which can therefore position the brand at a higher place in the consumers' mind. In our case of Arami Essentials, and the fact that they are so heavily linked to their Nigerian culture in their

marketing messages, it is clear to us as researchers why two of our Nigerian participants would prefer the Nigerian brand over the others.

When it comes to Faith, we wanted to understand the cultural similarities and differences between the United States culture, where Good Molecules stems from, along the Nigerian culture in which she lives. In accordance with Hofstede's Country comparison tool (Hofstede's Insights, 2024), where Nigeria and the United States differ drastically in power distance, individualism vs. collectivism and long-term vs short-term orientation; they are extremely similar when it comes to masculinity vs. femininity and uncertainty avoidance. As described in our literature review (Barnum, 2011), uncertainty avoidance generally consists of how people react to unknown situations or different contexts in which they are not normally accustomed to. In applying this definition to the skincare brands we chose for our participants, we asked questions to understand: the conceptions, or misconceptions, our participants have in regards to the Swedish, Nigerian and American culture.

The only positive conception Faith had towards the three cultures was with the American culture, which she deems as progressive. As researchers, we can interpret from this response that although Nigeria and the United States are not similar in every dimension, this is an admirable aspect in the eyes of our participant. This proves that Faith's positive response to the Good Molecules brand could just be her adaptability towards opinions that are different from her own, causing a direct correlation to how the uncertainty avoidance dimension positively impacts these two differing cultures in the perception of one participant. Additionally, she describes the Good Molecules brand as:

A brand for everyone, very diverse. (Faith, Interview, 6 May 2024)

Where Good Molecules thrives on diversity, she felt that Ida Warg Beauty and Arami Essentials lack inclusivity, Faith makes it clear that skincare brands need to start including all sorts of representation:

They should consider all kinds of people that would want to buy from them [along with] what would resonate and Good Molecules did well with that. (Faith, Interview, 6 May 2024)

Another case of adaptability is with one of our Italian participants, Mario. During his interview, our participant had expressed that he had never heard of any of the three brands prior to beginning his interactive period, even so, at the end of the three days, Good Molecules left the best impression. When it came to our interview question on whether there are certain cultural elements skincare brands should consider nowadays our participant stated:

I think there has to be functionality for all cultures, to be adaptable, and also eco-friendliness is so important. (Mario, Interview, 7 May 2024).

4.2.3 Simplicity

To understand Mario's response to the interview questions further, we must look at the national culture in which he comes from in comparison to the United States, where his chosen brand comes from. Although Mario feels strongly about his Italian culture, during the interview, he expressed to us his knowledge and exposure to American media, and how well-versed he is with the marketing and communication strategies used in the United States. When interpreting the dimensions of Italian culture with the United States (Hofstede's Insights, 2024), there are slight differences in regard to the dimensions of power distance, uncertainty avoidance and long-term vs. short-term orientation. In regards to individualism vs. collectivism and masculinity vs. femininity, both cultures seem to have the ability to prefer an individualistic culture in a success-oriented society. Considering our respondent explained the extent to which he felt resonated with one of the three brands, he makes it clear to us that:

In Italy, we have a culture that tends to be more simple, I was always taught not to overcomplicate simple products. I know it's the contrary of other cultures, I was probably not resonating with the brands fully because of this. I liked Good Molecules because they made products that are simple and they promote it because they are not overly costly, but that is the only one. (Mario, Interview, 7 May 2024)

Although our participant expressed his positive attitude toward the brand, he would not feel motivated to ever purchase from them. As was discussed in our literature review, Tan and Ming (2003), generated the hypothesis that brand symbolism and personality can become part of the consumers' lives and create a long-term relationship between the brand and themselves through cultural symbolism. As researchers, we can infer that the lack of his Italian cultural symbolism in these three brands discouraged his ability to form a long-term attachment with the brands. This theme of simplicity is an effective tool to use for skincare marketers and brands, however, it is difficult to apply in national cultures that do not have a simple mindset present, such as the United States.

This idea of simplicity is built upon further by our second Italian participant, Lilliana. Considering she also feels strongly connected to her Italian culture and has a high degree of familiarity when it comes to the Italian skincare market, our participant states:

When it comes to skincare, Italians tend to have a very simple skincare routine. We don't tend to have complex routines or steps, most people stop at cleansers and moisturisers. (Lilliana, Interview, 8 May 2024).

For this reason, she is very particular about the skincare products she purchases and uses, when asked about the factors she considers the most when choosing her skincare products, she describes to us:

First thing I do is to check whether most products are at least vegan or cruelty-free, which I consider very important. Second of all, the ingredients, nowadays we know more about ingredients in skincare so we have an idea on what's good and what's not, we are more knowledgeable now, I tend to look up the ingredients. Thirdly, the packaging. When I say packaging I mean it would be nice to have recyclable packaging. (Lilliana, Interview, 8 May 2024)

When it came to deciding which brand our participant preferred the most, she expressed she would equally choose between Good Molecules and Arami Essentials. It is clear to us researchers that Arami Essentials was appealing to our participant because the sense of simplicity was enough to draw her in:

I really enjoyed [Arami Essentials] when it comes to the packaging and how the products look, very simple. (Lilliana, Interview, 8 May 2024)

4.2.4 Targeting vs Inclusivity

Marketing and communications in the skincare industry today has been susceptible to discussions of inclusivity in targeting consumers. In other words, the use of skincare models from different cultural ethnicities, abilities and orientations amongst brands. During our research, although many consumers agreed that targeting a diverse audience was incredibly important and all kinds of people should be considered, other consumers felt differently.

Are there any cultural elements you think are important for skincare brands to consider?

They should consider all kinds of people that would want to buy from them and what would resonate and Good Molecules did well with that. (Faith, Interview, 6 May, 2024)

Their student branding and communications from Good Molecules. They were very intentional in targeting specific people. Very inclusive. (Faith, Interview, 6 May, 2024)

Yes, I feel like it also depends on their target market, I get if they just want to target their people, their culture, I suppose concise marketing is their goal, it makes sense if they are just representative of their people, but I really don't mind, it all depends if I really want to purchase the product. (Stephanie, Interview, 6 May 2024)

I think that it is important to communicate with your audience based on who you are targeting and your market. Being diverse would depend on what your market looks like. (Daniel, Interview, 6 May, 2024)

Several of the participants believed that although diversity in marketing and communications for skincare brands was important, who you were targeting was also seen as equally important. For example, in some cultures and countries such as Nigeria, the use of models that do not match or reflect what the indigenous people look like is typically frowned upon. Notably, in 2022, The Advertising Regulatory Council of Nigeria banned the use of foreign models or voice-overs in TV and Radio ads to encourage and foster local talent, whereas, in previous years, many of the faces Nigerians saw in advertising were non-African, typically White British faces from British colonial times (The Economic Times, 2022). Therefore, Nigerian brands that use non-African faces will typically face backlash on social media. This sentiment is reflected in the marketing Arami Essentials employs, where they choose to be representative of their culture.

No, I think I just purchase things that work, no matter the culture. (Simon, Interview, 6 May 2024)

When asked if they engaged with skincare brands that reflect their cultural background/ethnicity or values, the majority of participants agreed that they cared more about products that work, and the ingredients, rather than purchasing a brand that reflected their cultural background, ethnicity or values. However, when asked if cultural factors influenced the type of brands they purchase from, some participants stated they liked to support “black-owned” or brands owned by ethnic minorities.

This one [Arami Essentials] actually really surprised me, their account just feels very warm, simple, and pretty, very visually appealing. When I look into products I like simplicity and transparency. The one post that caught my attention was “mothers know best.” I am a mother and it was refreshing to see the story of the founder and her mother. It felt family-oriented, even though I don’t associate with the culture. The products seem on the higher-end side. (Scarlet, Interview, 6 May 2024)

Furthermore, as researchers, we can infer that consumers want to see their lifestyle portrayed in the marketing and communications of skincare brands. This was seen in our participant Scarlet from the United States, who although was not familiar with the Nigerian culture, felt the brand that had resonated with her the most was Arami Essentials. This was due to the fact that they had a video that recognised mothers, and as a mother herself, she was able to resonate with the brand due to this recognition. Overall, when comparing the national culture present between the United States and Nigeria, their only similarity lies in the observation that they are both masculine societies (Hofstede’s Insights, 2024). Regardless of the differentiating factors between these two cultures, Arami Essentials was able to transcend national boundaries and appeal to our American participants.

None of the brands spoke to me as a man, I believe maybe using male models would help so I know everyone can use their products. I could only see girls in their ads. (Donny, Interview, 5 May, 2024)

Although some participants were able to see themselves within these brands, our male participant from Canada, Donny, did not feel seen by any of the brands, due to their lack of male models in their communications. This implies that consumers want to see aspects of themselves portrayed in skincare advertising, either their lifestyle, ethnicity, culture or skin type and are likely to have positive perceptions of a brand if they meet these requirements. However, it did not mean these were the main deciding factors on the products they purchased, factors such as ingredients and effectiveness were important as well. These views by the participants are in line with the beliefs of Moore & Rugman (2002) that before considering globalisation, a brand's interest should first appeal to its regional consumers.

4.2.5 Accessibility and country of origin

Which one out of the three brands aligns the most with your preferences and would motivate you to purchase from them?

Good Molecules because they have products for me that I think will work on my skin. But they are not accessible in Japan. (Emily, Interview, 6 May, 2024)

Although two of the chosen brands had worldwide shipping, and one had available shipping within the EU, many of the participants interviewed did not believe that certain products were available to them nor that the marketing was directed at them, in many cases if they believed a brand targeted a certain culture or ethnicity, they did not believe the products were accessible to them, even though they were. However, it can also be deduced that participants view accessibility differently than brands do. Accessibility to consumers could mean being able to buy a brand's products in a physical or local store rather than solely online.

Arami Essentials was my favourite because I could identify in some way, but if I were to purchase from one brand it would be GoodMolecules only because it is super accessible to me, I can get it delivered or buy it whenever. There is not a lot of work I have to do to get that product. (Scarlet, Interview, 6 May 2024)

Although participant Scarlet, said her favourite brand was Arami Essentials and their marketing resonated with her the most, the participant said she was most likely to buy from Good Molecules as they were more accessible to her, being an American brand and living in The United States, getting their products is fast and easy.

Are there any cultural elements you think are important for skincare brands to consider?

Accessibility of your product, even though it says you ship to a country, how accessible is it for those people to access your product. (Jane, Interview, 5 May, 2024)

This was further solidified by our participant from The Netherlands, Jane, who said accessibility was an important cultural element for skincare brands to consider. Considering, these are ethical skincare brands that take a positive stance for the environment and for your skin, in our literature review, Peattie (1998) established two identifiers on what impacts consumers purchases towards these type of sustainable purchases, one of those identifiers being the price of the product and ultimately, how accessible the product is to the consumer.

To build on consumer perceptions, in reflection towards Supanvanij and Amine's (2000) country-of-origin effect and how it may positively or negatively influence consumer perception; our interviewee Yannis from Saudi Arabia indicates that you do not need to have previous conceptions of a brand that is strongly associated with a specific culture in order to be more inclined to purchase from a brand. At the beginning of the interview, Yannis expressed her knowledge of the chosen national cultures:

United States: A lot of emphasis on beauty and taking care of skin, a lot of American brands pushing their products in this industry, there is an American skincare culture. (Yannis, Interview, 8 May 2024)

Sweden: In terms of skincare for Swedish culture, it is that Swedes care about their skin, that is my perception. (Yannis, Interview, 8 May 2024)

Nigeria: In terms of skincare not really, I have not seen any Nigerian skincare content. (Yannis, Interview, 8 May 2024)

As researchers, we understand from this that Yannis had some existing perceptions of the culture in which two out of the three brands come from. Additionally, Yannis expresses to us that she does not have much experience in buying skincare products that are Arab-owned, considering that in her eyes they are not a well-known culture for skincare products, she relies on other national cultures for that. Even so, she still feels strongly connected to her own national culture. From the interview we had with Yannis, she made it clear that before finishing her three-day observation, she had known of Ida Warg Beauty, also emphasising that Ida Warg Beauty had some of the best content for her. Although it can be inferred that the positive impact of the Swedish country-of-origin effect is what captivated our interviewee towards them in the first place; it was only after the interaction period where our interviewee helped us understand that her perception of Nigerian skincare has shifted and she is now more intrigued than ever.

Arami was the one I ended up being intrigued by the most. I think they had a more eco-friendly stance and image where they had refillable products, where you don't have to buy

a new product entirely, and I think it was the one that kept marketing the fact that they are a vegan brand. (Yannis, Interview, 8 May 2024)

Furthermore, when looking at the national cultures present between Saudi Arabia, and her preferred brand of Arami Essentials in Nigeria, there tends to be similar aspects of these two cultures in regards to power distance, uncertainty avoidance and long term vs. short term orientation (Hofstede's Insights, 2024). Considering these two societies tend to view society in the same manner, it can be inferred by us researchers that this is the reasoning behind Yannis' initial curiosity for the Arami Essentials brand.

Do any cultural factors influence the type of brands you purchase from?

What influences the brand is its country of origin. I tend to be wary of American brands and I prefer brands that sell in the EU because they take extra steps to make sure what you are selling is safe. (Jane, Interview, 5 May, 2024)

Some of our participants, such as Jane from the Netherlands displayed “the country of origin effect” which is where consumers are influenced and form perceptions to evaluate foreign products, by observing where a product is made using their own stereotypes of the said country (Supanvanij and Amine, 2000). The participant referred to the lenient standards of American FDA approvals, where skincare products do not require pre-market approval (FDA.GOV, 2022), compared to that of the European Union (ctpa.org), where skincare products are regulated before being placed in the market along with mandatory and strict requirements, she was therefore unlikely to trust that American brands were safe to use.

4.2.6 Preferred Content

What sort of content did you find resonated with you the most from the skincare brands you looked at?

Someone using the product, seeing how it lays on the face. Showing how the product is supposed to be applied. The benefits of the product as well as what it contains. (Anna, Interview, 5 May, 2024)

Breaking down the products in some way, the ingredients and what it does, how to use the products (Jane, Interview, 5 May, 2024)

I preferred to see photos of actual people to visualise what my skin would look like (Daniel, Interview, 6 May, 2024)

In discussing preferred content and what consumers like to see when engaging with skincare brands, the majority of participants said they want to see humanised and engaging content. In considering the framework by Kim & Ko (2010) where five key aspects that are most effective in the social media space such as entertainment, interaction, customisation, trendiness and word-of-mouth. These factors were in line with our discussions with participants. Furthermore, electronic word-of-mouth was a common occurrence in participants' responses. Many of the participants said they would look at what influencers or other social media users' opinions on certain skincare products before purchasing, to ensure that the products work on their skin. This indicates that in regard to skincare products, consumers prefer to see content not just from the brand, but also from other creators, such as user-generated content.

Proof that it works, depends who the actors/ celebrities that brands are using to advertise, for example, dior uses anya taylor joy and I don't like her, shiseido uses anne hathaway, I love her, influencers do not have the same impact especially because there are so many influencers. (Erica, Interview, 6 May 2024)

This is similar to Dos Santos, De Brito Silva, Da Costa, et al (2023) beliefs that consumers have a better perception of a brand if they have been endorsed by a credible source such as an influencer. Today's consumers are highly driven by influencer marketing, whom they trust and seek out.

Yes, I like to know the roots of the brand, where the ingredients come from and if I am familiar with those ingredients. (Faith, Interview, 6 May, 2024)

The content on TikTok is where I look for more videos, and influencers that try products on themselves and analyse the effectiveness. I also look for a lot of skincare experts on popular skincare products. I want to be reassured I'm not wasting my money. (Mario, Interview, 7 May 2024)

Furthermore, storytelling was also a key aspect for participant Faith from Nigeria, who felt that skincare brands should have information on their roots and where their ingredients are from. This storytelling was evident in the brand Arami Essentials, however, the other two brands took a different approach, choosing to focus more on their product, without much content on the roots of their brand or ingredients.

In this study, participants also majorly favoured video content such as Instagram reels of product demonstrations.

4.2.7 Sustainability

This view of sustainability as a megatrend introduced by authors Sharma et al., (2021), can cause questions to arise when it comes to how ethical brands truly are. In regards to our participants' views of our three cultures, many interviewees had comments about American cultural consumerism:

American culture is very fast, they want everything super fast and available to them, they also have a huge variety of products and they know what they like and what they want, in Colombia we do not have many options. (Simon, Interview, 6 May 2024)

American culture is very consumerist focused, they are always trying to get you to buy something. (Jane, Interview, 5 May, 2024)

Hustle culture mindset (Thomas, Interview, 6 May 2024)

From this, we can deduce that participants from various national cultures have a common conception of the United States as a culture that places emphasis on fast consumption. Additionally, the sale of sustainable products is only one part of the bigger picture, as described by McDonald and Oates (2006), the next part of green purchasing has to be the disposal of the products, as well as their packaging.

In regards to the packaging of the American brand Good Molecules, our participant from Colombia, Simon, stated:

From GoodMolecules I thought it was very young and colourful, I did not get an ethical organic feel from the brand just by their posts, from the packaging it does not indicate they are natural, very young and cheap. (Simon, Interview, 6 May 2024).

This statement made by our participant is built upon further in correlation with the Good Molecules official website, as it is discussed in our data from the brands, although Good Molecules has an ethical stance, they do not label themselves sustainable nor have they made any sustainability statements. Even so, they express the non-toxicity of their products, while maintaining a cruelty-free and vegan stance. As researchers, we now understand that consumers are incredibly ingredient-focused on the products they choose to purchase for their face, however, an aspect of equal importance for some consumers is the packaging as well.

Arami was the one I ended up being intrigued by the most. I think they had a more eco-friendly stance and image where they had refillable products, where you don't have to buy a new product entirely. (Yannis, Interview, 6 May 2024)

Arami Essentials: I liked this one a lot. The first day we started observing is when I noted their packaging, it conserves the products and it's good for the environment, this was another aspect I had not thought of before. (Aaron, Interview, 6 May 2024)

Arami put out a lot of ads of the products being recyclable materials which is important to me. (Lilliana, Interview, 8 May 2024)

Where the American culture lacks in considering the after-life of their products, the Nigerian culture seems to have placed a higher importance on their ethical brand, by being conscious of the waste they are producing and how their packaging and products can help minimise that.

Are you familiar with the ethical skincare industry? How important is it for you to purchase from an ethical brand?

Yes, I have heard of ethical skincare in the past but I don't pay attention to it and I go for whatever brand is good. (Faith, Interview, 6 May 2024)

Yes I am familiar with the ethical skincare industry, and it is important for me to the extent that the product does not cost too much. (Mario, Interview, 6 May 2024)

What sort of factors do you consider when choosing a skincare product?

I would prefer ethical skincare brands. Also if it works for my skin, if it works for every kind of skin. (Emily, Interview, 6 May, 2024)

Furthermore, during our interviews, we found similarities with Camilleri et al. (2023) beliefs that consumers evaluate sustainable products based on their functional values such as price and quality and symbolic values such as appearance, emotional value and social status. Several of our participants stated that when choosing a skincare product, they wanted a product that feels good on their skin, great ingredients and products that work, as well as products that look good on the shelf and smell good.

4.3 Chapter Summary

In this chapter we have presented our findings and an analysis of our interviewees. We grouped our textual analysis into two recurring themes and the primary analysis from our interviews into seven themes. Such themes build upon the perceptions of consumers in relation to their national culture, these include: *link to culture and heritage, clear ethical stance, a sense of familiarity, adaptability, simplicity, targeting vs inclusivity, accessibility, preferred content and sustainability*. We included direct quotes from interview participants and connected these findings to existing literature and theory. These themes have allowed us to form a better understanding of the research question and study, helping us to conclude the following chapter.

5 Discussion

5.1 Managerial Implications

With the rise of these ethical skincare brands, there is a growing importance for brands to be aware of how they are being perceived by consumers. Although brands are becoming global companies, with strong social media presences, and the ability to ship their products to countries around the world, the main obstacle is no longer the purchasing power of the consumer, rather where the consumer categorises your brand in their mind. Consumers are more aware than ever of products from various markets and cultures, our findings have indicated that there are still preconceived biases that are inherently within consumers when it comes to trying new products or purchasing from new brands.

Several different markets and individuals have been ignored, along with cultures and ethnicities. For this reason, many brands can tend to focus on their local consumer culture, while addressing the concerns of their target market, all the while being globally available to those who may be interested. While culture plays a role in how you are initially perceived by a consumer, several other aspects are growing in relevancy as well. These aspects include real people representation, transparency of the products and ingredients, social media content that reflects the results of the product, and overall accessibility to the consumer. From the analysis of our participants, these ideas were not always clear in the marketing and communications of the brands on their Instagram pages, whereas, for us researchers, it was extremely clear on their website. As we know, the websites of brands normally cater to existing consumers of the brand, even so, the findings of our participants lead us to believe that there is a potential misalignment between what the brands are representing on their Instagram pages versus the deeper portrayal of the brand on their website.

5.2 Practical Implications

The practical implication of this study is to provide some input to ethical brands in developing marketing strategies that can be globally and locally relevant. Understanding how cultural factors influence consumer perceptions can help brands tailor their messages to better resonate with local audiences. This is especially relevant for smaller brands looking to enter

new markets by incorporating local values and elements into their marketing campaigns to create a more personalised and relatable consumer experience. Additionally, brands need to be aware that consumers want to see themselves represented in marketing communications, and should find a balance between targeting everyone and targeting specific consumers. This should also be represented in the products they sell, ensuring that products can appeal to their consumers and is a reflection of the markets they're targeting.

Furthermore, using the findings and inputs from the participants, brands can reflect on what actions they can take to improve their online marketing strategies to appeal to a wider target audience. This is especially relevant as digital communications have become integral to brand marketing strategies. Digital platforms offer opportunities for brands to engage with consumers through culturally relevant content, fostering a sense of community and connection with consumers.

5.3 Theoretical Implications

This study covers theoretical frameworks of consumer perceptions relating to their national culture. We cover areas such as the social credibility theory, Hofstede's cultural dimensions theory, country-of-origin effect and consumer ethnocentrism, which are key theoretical areas relating to how consumers make decisions and justify their behaviours, especially when participating in ethical consumerism. During our study, we contribute to the literature on the impact of culture in marketing and communications by providing empirical evidence on the linkage of cultural perceptions to factors that influence brand perception and further dictate consumer behaviour. The findings highlight the need for a culturally informed marketing digital space, one that delves into the existing interplay between global branding and cultural dynamics.

Additionally, we have analysed and received insights from 20 consumers in 14 different countries, residing in different regions of the world, and this can help to provide some insights on how consumers from various national cultures view ethical skincare brands, and what they consider when buying from a brand. Further, as we have focused our study on ethical brands, the study contributes to the growing body of literature on ethical consumers and brands. It examines how cultural values influence perceptions of ethical brands, providing insights for brands looking to position themselves as ethical and socially responsible. This can also contribute to theoretical discussions on the role of ethicality in branding, in a diverse cultural context.

6 Conclusion

6.1 Key Findings

This study aimed to examine the cultural impact of three different ethical skincare brand marketing with the use of the research question:

How does national culture impact consumer perceptions regarding ethical skincare brand marketing?

To examine this research question, the study focused on three ethical skincare brands from three different and unique cultures, Sweden, Nigeria and The United States. Through the use of qualitative research methods of interviews and textual analysis, eight main recurring themes were evident (1) sense of familiarity (2) adaptability, (3) simplicity (4) targeting vs inclusivity, (5) accessibility and country of origin, (6) preferred content, (7) sustainability (8) link to culture and heritage and (9) clear ethical stance. These findings helped to demonstrate the beliefs consumers have when it comes to ethical skincare brand marketing. Furthermore, through the use of research participants from fourteen different countries, we have been able to compare the cultural aspects that form these opinions on ethical brands, linking to the existing theory on cultural dimensions by Hofstede (1980), and how they relate to participants' views of these brands.

To answer our research question, we conclude that national culture has demonstrated its lasting hold on consumer perceptions, even within this fairly new realm of ethical skincare brand marketing. We believe that culture is in our DNA and it shapes our perception and behaviour. It's real people who consume, therefore, our individual decisions are important.

With the growing portrayal of globalisation present among skincare companies today, consumers' initial impressions and opinions of brands are formed through the marketing and communications of the brand. In many cases, communication strategies are not always reflective of the cultural contexts of their global consumers. During our research, we observed that consumers had notable things to say regarding the language employed by the brands, the type of audience their products seemed catered to, the packaging of the product, and the type of content published by the brand. Our participants assumed the role of outside observers, deeply trying to understand the business strategy employed by these three brands and forming opinions about what they saw for three consecutive days. In most cases, the majority of

participants had initially neglected the thought of their culture being an influencing factor in their decision-making process. So far as to generalise that their cultural factors did not influence the type of brands they purchased from. On the other hand, the answers to their interview questions uncovered a different reality, where they emphasised that they did not feel represented in much of the content produced by these brands. Further indicating that they would feel strongly connected to the brand if it was a reflection of themselves; signalling that the long-term exposure of their culture and beliefs influences the type of marketing content that they could deem as relatable. We deduced that in many cases if the brand lacked aspects that did not resonate with our participants, they were less likely to view the brand positively.

Furthermore, as revealed in the findings, participants demonstrated biases for certain brands based on their culture and in some cases did not have a perception at all of the certain cultures, for example, the Swedish and Nigerian cultures were not always linked to common perceptions, whereas the United States always had some sort of perception linked to them. This indicates the existing biases and overexposure to Western media and consumption; which is revealed through the observation that the Good Molecules brand has a notably large amount of followers on Instagram, in contrast to Arami Essentials and Ida Warg Beauty; although being established within the same year or following year of the other two brands.

This exemplifies the existing perceptions of products being catered towards the Global North and the fact that the United States is a leader in the skincare industry, with Nigeria and Sweden following behind. From this, we deduced the United States to be a culturally diverse country with many cultural contexts to consider in its marketing and communications mix. With this, they have been able to successfully represent all types of ethnicities and cultures in their marketing messages, with many of our participants indicating a positive outlook on the brand after their three-day observations. Whereas Arami Essentials and Ida Warg Beauty did leave positive impressions, it was clear from our findings that they did not always meet the expectations of our interviewees.

Through this study, we have fulfilled our research objectives and successfully explored the role national culture continues to play in consumer perceptions and how it manifests itself through the interpretation of three diverse ethical skincare brands.

6.2 Limitations

Although our paper unveils the cultural impact on ethical skincare brand marketing, due to the limited time frame we have to investigate this phenomenon, we are limited in the depth of analysis that can be performed and the number of interviews we can conduct.

It is important to note that the participants' responses do not necessarily reflect the views of the broader population. Although one participant is not reflective of the culture within an entire country, our participants do have features and cultural aspects that can only come from growing up or living in a place for a long-term basis, which proves useful to us as researchers. Further analysis of these cultures, as well as a larger scope of participants, would have to be carried out to assess this phenomenon that analyses the importance of national culture, even in a world that is shifting towards a global culture. Additionally, our study focuses on skincare brands from three different countries. These brands' practices do not necessarily capture the normal practices of brands from those countries.

Furthermore, there is limited literature on ethical skincare brands concerning culture and consumer perceptions, therefore, we have used the readily available literature that applies to our study. Another limitation is that we have analysed the marketing activities based on data from the brands' websites and Instagram pages, and we have not analysed content on other platforms such as newsletters or their other various social media platforms. Further studies can be done analysing all the social media platforms of the brands to understand their marketing strategies to a deeper extent. We believed that it was important to simplify our study therefore, we chose one platform, Instagram, in which the brand displayed the most recent marketing activities, along with their website.

In choosing the brands which we decided to study, one limitation we faced was that some brands do not outright label themselves as ethical in their communications, despite most of their products being described with ethical attributes. This was seen in one of our chosen brands; Good Molecules.

6.3 Future Research

This study examined the marketing and communications of ethical skincare brands in three different countries, Sweden, Nigeria and The United States, and explored how culture plays a role in consumer perceptions. For future research, researchers can have more controlled observations from participants, such as a longer time frame to observe the skincare brands. Not all of the brands posted regularly on those days, therefore, there is room for improvement in tracking the days the brands are most active and using that as a guide in order to encourage participants to interact with the brand as much as possible. Further, participants can begin and end their observation periods at the same time, so they are seeing the same content. In many cases, we had to cater to the schedules of our participants and many had to begin their interaction period sooner than other participants.

Initially, our research aimed to study the three ethical skincare brands and the marketing strategies for each national culture in which the brand was established. After reaching out to marketing managers for each brand, and receiving no response, we shifted our focus to a question that would be more feasible for us to conduct. We decided to remain with the initial three skincare brands but to take the route of consumer perceptions, and the possible influence of national culture. This shift from a brand focus to a consumer focus allowed us to explore literature that connected us to our own national culture and the current national culture of the place we reside in for our studies. This instantly became an intriguing research question for us to focus on, even so, many articles on consumer perception have researched cross-cultural marketing and communications, so we decided to focus solely on the culture in which people have resided long-term.

Future studies can build on this work by focusing on other cultural contexts, such as examining Asian consumers' perceptions of ethical skincare brands. Specifically, the research could explore how Asian consumers perceive ethical products from both local Asian brands and global brands. Such studies could provide insights into the cultural factors that influence Asian consumers' attitudes towards ethical products, and the differences in consumer perceptions between local and global ethical brands within Asian markets. Additionally, researchers could investigate how global ethical brands can adapt their marketing strategies to better resonate with Asian consumers.

By extending the research to include diverse cultural contexts, we can gain a more comprehensive understanding of the interplay between culture and consumer behaviour in the ethical branding landscape. This expanded scope can help global brands develop more effective, culturally sensitive marketing strategies that appeal to a broader range of consumers.

6.3 Chapter Summary

This chapter concludes our research paper by giving an overview of the key findings of our research, the limitations we faced, and recommendations for future research.

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AI Use

In figuring out how to properly structure our Appendix section, we asked ChatGPT to suggest the usual format practices for including interviews in an Appendix. Furthermore, we also made use of Grammarly, which corrected grammatical and punctuation errors as well as suggested possible synonyms in sentences.

Appendix A: Interview Questions

1. To begin, may we ask what is the culture of the place you reside, How strongly do you feel connected to this national culture?
2. Have you been exposed to marketing and communications of skincare products from your culture? If so, please explain what you are used to seeing, if not, what culture do you tend to see most marketing and communication from?
3. What are your conceptions (or misconceptions) of these three cultures (if you have any) Swedish culture/ American culture/ Nigerian culture?
4. Are you familiar with the ethical skincare industry? How important is it for you to purchase from an ethical brand?
5. What sort of factors do you consider when choosing a skincare product?
6. Have you previously heard of Good Molecules, Arami Essentials and Ida Warg Beauty?
7. What were your first impressions of each brand?
8. Did their messages align with your preferences? Would you consider elaborating on what particularly stood out to you?
9. Do any cultural factors influence the type of brands you purchase from?
10. Are there any cultural elements you think are important for skincare brands to consider?
11. Do the marketing messages resonate with you in any way? Do you feel seen or targeted by these brands?
12. What sort of content did you find resonated with you the most from the skincare brands you looked at?
13. Do you think you engage more with skincare brands that reflect your cultural background/ ethnicity or values?
14. Which one out of the three brands aligns the most with your preferences and would motivate you to purchase from them?