

What green are we talking about? Divergences in the nomenclature of sustainable products

De que verde estamos falando? Divergências na nomenclatura de produtos sustentáveis

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Abstract: *The abundance of marketing definitions and criteria creates confusion among consumers when trying to comprehend the impact of supposedly sustainable products and make informed purchasing decisions. This study, based on a survey of consumer behavior literature spanning from 2011 to 2021 where 432 articles were selected, delves into the diversity and potential discrepancies in terminology associated with sustainable products, corporate marketing strategies, and their potential influence on consumers. We highlight several recommendations for marketing practitioners and policymakers, including the importance of conducting long-term awareness campaigns, and establishing standards for sustainable products to enhance product differentiation and enable informed consumer choices.*

Keywords: *Communication; consumption; sustainable products; green products.*

Resumo: *A variedade de definições e critérios gera confusão entre consumidores quando buscam compreender o impacto de produtos supostamente sustentáveis e tomar decisões de compra informadas. Esta pesquisa, baseada em um levantamento da literatura sobre comportamento do consumidor de 2011 a 2021 em que foram selecionados 432 artigos, investiga a diversidade e possíveis discrepâncias na terminologia associada a produtos sustentáveis e potencial influência sobre os consumidores. Destacamos várias recomendações para profissionais de marketing e decisores políticos, incluindo a importância de realizar campanhas de sensibilização a longo prazo e de estabelecer normas para produtos sustentáveis para melhorar a diferenciação dos produtos e permitir escolhas informadas dos consumidores.*

Palavras-chave: *Comunicação; consumo; produtos sustentáveis; produtos verdes.*

In recent decades, a growing debate on environmental and social issues has driven interest and demand for the adoption of sustainable practices and products (SHOVE; SPURLING, 2013; UNRUH; ETTENSON, 2010; ROCHE et al., 2009). The search for ecologically friendly and socially responsible alternatives has been reflected in both individual consumption decisions and corporate marketing strategies, with a growing number of products making these claims (HAWS et al., 2013). However, as the market for sustainable products expands, a critical question arises: the extent to which consumers can purchase products and services that genuinely reduce social and environmental impacts. A derivative question is the diversity of nomenclatures used to describe these products and their attributes. The proliferation of terms can lead to incomplete or erroneous comprehension, jeopardizing the ability of consumers and companies to grasp the features of sustainable products and make informed choices.

The various nomenclatures used to categorize products as “green,” “clean,” “ecological,” “environmentally friendly,” “ethical,” and their variations often result in confusion and uncertainty, given the absence of a clear consensus among consumers regarding these definitions and attributes (LIM, 2017). The inconsistent use of these terminologies, therefore, undermines corporate credibility and perplexes consumers, making informed decision-making difficult. Recognizing these distinctions is vital for establishing shared communication standards between companies and consumers and enhancing marketing strategies within the realm of sustainable products.

Therefore, this exploratory study aims to analyze the diversity and potential discrepancies in the terminologies related to sustainable products in corporate marketing strategies. By scrutinizing the variations in sustainable product terminology, this study sheds light the conceptual intricacies surrounding these products, as well as the decision-making processes connected to them, offering valuable insights for marketing practitioners and policymakers. To accomplish this, we delve into the primary theories applied to consumer behavior, briefly address the

issues associated with the conceptualization of sustainable consumption, and explore the different terminologies employed to describe sustainable products in specialized literature, bolstered by illustrative examples from representative sectors. Finally, we discuss how to address these issues to enhance the clarity and efficacy of communication about sustainable products.

Methodology

This exploratory study begins with a comprehensive examination of scientific articles published in the top 30 marketing journals, as identified by the Scimago Journal and Country Rank (SCIMAGO, 2020). We covered the period from 2011 to 2021 and searched for consumption typologies related to sustainability aspects. By using the terms “green consumption,” “ethical consumption,” and “sustainable consumption” in our search within the databases of the journals, 432 articles were identified. While we provide detailed explanations of these three terms in section ahead, throughout the text, we use the term “sustainable consumption” in a general and inclusive manner to encompass the array of similar terms. This choice is primarily due to its significantly higher occurrence rate, with 235 instances in the aforementioned journals during the specified period, compared to 87 for “ethical consumption” and 110 for “green consumption.” Besides, it encompasses a broader scope, which includes environmental, social, and economic dimensions incorporated into its concept. Following the initial search, other papers, reports, and webpages were included in our analysis through the snowball method. This extension was made specifically to cover product nomenclatures, which is not restricted to academic applications, encompassing discussions on company websites, blogs, magazines, and newspaper articles. To foster a deeper comprehension of the influence of these nomenclature on consumer purchasing behavior, the next sections address an exposition of diverse theoretical perspectives designed to encourage more sustainable consumption practices among consumers.

Subsequently, we delve into an analysis of the variety of nomenclatures and their potential ramifications on consumption.

Purchase intention and consumer behavior

Understanding consumers' perspectives on the purchase of sustainable products is key for marketing practitioners, as it enables the formulation of suitable strategies for developing markets for such products (YADAV; PATHAK, 2017; CHAN; LAU, 2002). The comprehension of consumption dynamics concerning sustainable products has been extensively examined across various scientific fields. Studies within the realms of psychology (CHERNEV; BLAIR, 2020; HAWS et al., 2013), economics (RIBEIRO; VEIGA, 2011), environmental sciences (ANANTHARAMAN, 2018; GATERSLEBEN, 2001), sociology (CORSINI et al., 2019; JACOBSEN; HANSEN, 2019), and marketing (PARDANA et al., 2019; SHARMA, 2021), demonstrate that consumer preferences are not unidimensional and necessitate contribution from various fields for a comprehensive understanding.

Various theories established in the field of consumer studies provide the foundation for comprehending consumer dynamics. According to García-Salirrosas and Rondon-Eusebio (2022), the Theory of Planned Behavior (TPB), which posits that behavior can be predicted by analyzing individuals' attitudes, subjective norms, and perceived behavioral control, is the most widely accepted approach in the literature. The Theory of Planned Behavior (TPB) (AJZEN, 1985) suggests that consumers act intentionally based on rational decisions and forecasts behavior by analyzing cognitive constructs. TPB establishes a fundamental set of constructs relevant as predictors of purchase intention: attitudes, subjective norms, and perceived behavioral control. These constructs are extensively employed in studies and experiments with population samples to forecast purchase intentions for specific product categories (TESTA; SARTI; FREY, 2019; KIM; CHUNG, 2011).

The original model has received additional construct contributions aimed at enhancing its predictive capacity in contemporary studies.

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Studies grounded in TPB furnish a foundation for practical applications, such as shaping public policies and creating educational campaigns aimed at mitigating undesirable behaviors (MOUTINHO; ROAZZI, 2010) or promoting desirable behaviors, like the adoption of products with lower environmental footprints. The literature has shown that even though a majority of consumers express a preference for purchasing sustainable products, this does not invariably translate to purchase intention or behavior (MAGNUSSON et al., 2001). Despite the existence of the “attitude-behavior gap” (CARRINGTON et al., 2010), more intricate studies have demonstrated the positive influence of green attributes on purchase intentions when considered in conjunction with other variables and within the framework of general benefits associated with rational choice (SANTOS et al., 2018). In this regard, prior research argues that green product attributes impact is more pronounced when the product aligns with individual consumer needs (such as price and brand value) (ROCHE et al., 2009).

Recent contributions in the field of green/environmental buying behavior provide valuable insights for understanding consumer behavior. The value-belief-norm theory of environmentalism, as proposed by Paul Stern (STERN et al., 1999), opens a specific avenue for studying normative factors associated with sustainable attitudes and behaviors. In line with Theory of Consumption Values (which defines five consumer values¹ that influence consumer behavior), Haws et al. (2013) introduce a scale of *green consumption values* that express consumers’ environmental protection values through their purchasing and consumption behaviors. This scale demonstrates that “green consumption values” are part of a network of principles associated with the conservation of environmental resources but are also linked to the conservation of financial and physical resources.

Different theoretical perspectives have been provided in the literature to encourage more sustainable consumer practices (CONNELLY et al.,

1 Functional, social, emotional, conditional, and epistemic value (SHETH; NEWMAN; GROSS, 1991).

2011). Although, different markets behave differently based on their levels of knowledge and understanding of the environmental aspects of available alternatives. These elements should be taken into consideration when formulating specific national and regional public policies aimed at promoting the consumption of sustainable products (OECD, 2008), and recognize the significance of how attributes are presented and how information is tailored to different consumer groups (RUF et al. 2022).

Knowledge and Information as Decision-Making Elements

Environmental concerns did not significantly influence the field of marketing until the 1970s, a circumstance attributed to the limited scope of environmental regulations in many countries and society's ambivalent stance on environmentalism and corporate social responsibility practices (MENON; MENON, 1997). While this perspective was linked to academic circles and specific niches, the 1990s marked the emergence of environmentally oriented marketing strategies as a more widely accepted business paradigm, with more companies incorporating environmental considerations into their strategic processes (KIRKPATRICK, 1990). Concurrently, marketing professionals have been keen on identifying and profiling environmentally conscious consumers (CONNOLLY; PROTHERO, 2008). Though, there remains ongoing uncertainty among companies regarding the dimensions to consider when developing sustainable products (DANGELICO; PONTRAN-DOLFO, 2010).

An essential factor influencing consumers' decision-making is the level of available information and their knowledge about the attributes of a given product. Studies have explored the impact of consumer knowledge on attitude formation (ELLEN et al. 1991; LEE, 2010; TAN, 2011) and purchasing behavior (WANG et al. 2019). Furthermore, it has been demonstrated that consumer knowledge significantly influences

the intention to purchase ethically (DE PELSMACKER et al. 2005; BERKI-KISS; MENRAD, 2022).

Various studies have demonstrated the substantial impact of consumer knowledge on their consumption behavior (COWLEY; MITCHELL, 2003; BETTMAN; PARK, 1980; ALBA, 1983). The influence of consumer knowledge on purchase intention has been highlighted in studies considering various forms of consumer knowledge (such as environmental literacy, familiarity, prior experience, and product-specific expertise) to assess their impact on purchase intention. Moreover, trustiness also serves as a positive influencer, affecting both the intention to purchase and the willingness to pay for personal care products (YILDIRIM et al. 2021).

According to Cerri, Testa, and Rizzi (2018), providing information to consumers is essential for promoting pro-environmental attitudes and the purchase of green products, such as the use of ecological labels, which “can play a significant role in shaping attitudes toward green products by interacting with environmental concern” (p. 3). Combining multiple theoretical perspectives is also essential to comprehending consumer behavior related to sustainable consumption practices (LIM, 2017). To enhance green marketing strategies, ongoing research is needed to understand consumer profiles, focusing on how they access and integrate information into their decision-making process. This includes explaining green attributes using terminologies that are perceived and recognized by consumers. The choice of these terminologies should be based on consumers’ varying levels of knowledge, attitudes toward attributes, and subjective norms.

Sustainable Consumption: Seeking a Definition

When addressing the necessity for a clear and precise definition of sustainable products, it is vital to recognize that the concept of sustainable consumption is still a problematic and evolving field of study (LIM, 2017). While some argue that having a clear and explicit definition of sustainable consumption may not be essential (PEATTIE; COLLINS,

2009), we contend that the absence of a definition hampers practical utility, hindering the identification of common ground for addressing the issue. In this regard, there have been various efforts to establish a well-defined concept of sustainable practices associated with sustainable consumption (LIU et al., 2017)

One of the concepts in use is *ethical consumption*, described as “a conscientious way of consuming and purchasing products that obey certain ethical issues such as the support of fair wages, worker’s rights and safety, and also contemplates the protection of the natural environment” (BERKI-KISS; MENRAD, 2022, p. 1). It encompasses a wide range of consumer behaviors, from abstaining from purchasing products from socially or environmentally irresponsible companies to boycotting those that exploit impoverished producers (STARR, 2009). On the other hand, *responsible consumption* serves as a broad concept that encompasses aspects related to product choices and consumption, including social, environmental, and ethical considerations (LIM, 2016). Another comprehensive term, *green consumption*, pertains to consumption practices aimed at conserving the natural environment (PEATIE, 2010; TESTA et al., 2021; VERNEKAR; WADHWA, 2011). The term “green” encompasses multiple dimensions, such as ecological, political, corporate social responsibility, fair trade, conservation, nonprofit organizations, new consumerism, sustainability, and equality (MCDONAGH; PROTHERO, 1996). In this context, it is also important to note *sustainable (non)consumption practices*, where individuals reduce their consumption through fewer purchases, prolonging the use and maintenance of goods, and selectively purchasing ethically and sustainably sourced products (MARTIN-WOODHEAD, 2022)

Nevertheless, the approach in terms of *sustainable consumption* is considered broader when compared to other types of consumption mentioned in the literature, such as *ethical* and *green consumption*, because it emphasizes collective actions and political, economic, and institutional changes to make consumption patterns and levels more sustainable (SANTOS et al., 2018). Although the diversity of approaches to the

topic is recognized, Lim (2017) pointed out seven general principles surrounding sustainable consumption: a) meets the basic needs of the current generation, b) does not impoverish future generations, c) does not cause irreversible harm to the environment, d) does not create loss of function in natural systems (ecological and human value systems, environmental and social responsibility), e) improves resource efficiency, f) enhances the quality of life, and g) avoids modern consumerism and overconsumption.

While it can be argued that there is a consensus regarding the significant role of consumption lifestyles in achieving sustainable development (JACKSON; MICHAELIS, 2003), it is crucial to contribute to the consolidation of knowledge about sustainable products and practices from a consumer's perspective. This advancement serves to improve market practices and further develop the consumer decision-making landscape. However, the limitations of this approach must be also acknowledged, as a substantial portion of the global population is unable to make consumption choices due to increasing levels of poverty (UNITED NATIONS DEVELOPMENT PROGRAMME, 2022). Furthermore, issues related to social justice remain largely unexplored within the field of sustainable consumption research (ANANTHARAMAN, 2018)

Differences in Terminology Related to Sustainable Products

Various terminologies have been employed to define what constitutes a sustainable product. In this section, we introduce some of these terminologies to underscore their distinctions and overlaps, offering practical examples of their usage in marketing. The following nomenclatures were identified in the articles selected through the literature search: a) green products b) clean products, c) ethical products, d) environmentally friendly products, e) environmental products, and f) sustainable products.

According to Ottman and Paro (1994), *environmentally friendly products* and *green products* are interchangeable terms used to denote products designed to meet consumers' environmental preservation needs, with a lower environmental impact compared to alternatives. *Green product* or *environmental product* usually describe products that "protect or enhance the natural environment, conserve energy, and reduce or eliminate toxic agents, pollution, and waste" (OTTMAN et al., 2006, p. 24). Similarly, Santos et al., (2018), while also considering the two terms interchangeable, stressed that the absence of a unified definition results from the lack of metrics allowing for the satisfactory measurement of the environmental impacts of products in a comparative manner.

However, in the mid-2000s, Dangelico and Pontrandolfo (2010) proposed a matrix that characterizes *green products* and practices across different dimensions. According to the authors, a product can be considered *green* based on one of three types of environmental focus (materials, energy, or pollution) and its level of impact (lower than conventional products, zero impact, or a positive contribution to the environment by reducing the impact of other products). The matrix is a valuable tool for marketing practitioners, enabling them to specify how the impact occurs in their statements, defining when, why, and to what extent a product is considered *green*, thus reducing the risk of greenwashing.

Based on a systematic review, García-Salirrosas and Rondon-Eusebio (2022) present five categories of green marketing practices: (a) green products and services, (b) green corporate image, (c) green advertising, (d) green shopping experience, and (e) green marketing mix. The category of *green products and services* comprises environmentally friendly products and services, which do not harm the environment in their production, content, delivery, and usage characteristics. They make efforts to protect or improve the environment through energy conservation, resource optimization, component reuse, recycling, and the reduction or elimination of toxic agents. Within this category, there are strategies such as (a) the use of ecological labels, (b) the development of high-quality

green products and services, (c) the brand value of green products, (d) remanufacturing strategy, and (e) the use of eco-friendly bags.

In the personal care segment, nomenclatures linked to a lower environmental impact, such as “green beauty” and “clean beauty,” have become important selling points. Despite serving as comprehensive descriptors for various practices, these terms have faced scrutiny regarding greenwashing. As pointed out by Shaw and Tzeses (2023), misleading marketing has been used by companies to make their products seem natural, even they are not actually organic, sustainable or ethically made. The terms “green beauty” and “clean beauty” are recognized as inconclusive equivalents in terms of the processes and inputs they encompass. When it comes to individual-use technological devices, like smartphones, sustainable, eco-friendly, or green phones are those designed for efficient material usage and extended lifespans, incorporating features that facilitate battery replacement and other repairs to ensure prolonged device functionality, whether under initial or subsequent ownership. In the case of durable consumer goods, such as cars, electric options with lower carbon emissions are recognized as “eco versions” within the segment. This attribute directly implies a reduction in greenhouse gas emissions during the usage phase, although not necessarily in other stages of the production-consumption process, such as manufacturing and distribution.

Those examples illustrate the industry’s diverse terminology used to portray a sustainable image, which can potentially confuse consumers and may not always align with actual practices.

Conclusion

Considering the variation in terms and their meanings when promoting sustainable products, marketing practitioners must accurately address sustainability aspects tailored to their target audiences to enhance consumer engagement. The literature in this field recognizes that sustainable consumption encompasses various dimensions, with products

potentially fulfilling multiple criteria simultaneously, like energy efficiency, fair trade, child labor-free, and the use of recycled materials.

If consumers require information to make more informed choices, including opting for non-consumption strategies like boycotts, dedicated companies and public initiatives should launch long-term marketing campaigns aimed at consumer education. This perspective can steer supply and demand dynamics, benefiting companies, consumers, and the environment. Addressing complex issues necessitates integrated solutions that extend beyond the realm of consumption. It requires coordinated efforts across different sectors, including businesses, governments, civil society, and multilateral organizations, working collectively to achieve more ambitious sustainability objectives for the planet.

While there is consensus that current consumption patterns are unsustainable (THØGERSEN, 2014), there are still significant divergences on how to change consumption patterns and levels to reduce their impacts. Psychologists and economists focus on approaches to promote individual-level changes, while sociologists point to structural solutions (BURNINGHAM; VENN, 2020). We believe that actions should be complementary at both individual and collective levels to achieve better results in the consolidation of sustainable markets. Here, we present contributions to the development of marketing strategies for companies and the formulation of public policies based on the discussion undertaken.

Standardizing Terminology in Sectors

The proliferation of terms and definitions hampers conscious consumer choice, as well as companies with real proposals to offer differentiated products. Therefore, terms for presenting sustainable attributes should be as consistent as possible within the same segment, as consumers relate to different terms and sustainability conditions in each product segment. The consumer goods sector encompasses the highest levels of diversification among green products and practices (DANGELICO;

PONTRANDOLFO, 2010). Hence, what can be communicated in terms of food production and personal care items, for example, is greater than what the car and smartphone industry can achieve.

Sustainability-Driven Principles

Basic sustainability principles, as identified by Lim (2017), guide not only communication strategies but also product development and launch strategies, an integral part of the marketing mix (KHAN, 2014). In the absence of standardized definitions recognized in their segments, cutting-edge companies need to innovate and effectively promote “sustainable” attributes that differentiate their products.

Enhancing Knowledge of Sustainable Products

Investment in knowledge-related marketing strategies through “advertising campaigns that educate consumers about the beneficial effects of using sustainable products for the society and environment” (RECKER; SALEEM, 2014, p. 3). This also includes strategies related to experiences that can be achieved using free product trials and promoting hands-on experiences with processes and components as a marketing tool (RECKER; SALEEM, 2014). The use of eco-labels guides companies to increase transparency and consumer knowledge of existing claim labels (CERRI; TESTA; RIZZI, 2018). They can play a significant role in shaping attitudes toward sustainable products, which requires new studies on green consumer profiles based on how consumers access and integrate information in their decision-making to improve green marketing campaigns. Besides, Consumers with low product knowledge often rely on price as the primary determining factor. Therefore, businesses can target these consumers with attractive prices and sales representatives to increase consumer product knowledge and perceptions of sustainable options, resulting in higher purchase intentions (LIU; TSAUR, 2020).

Development and Implementation of Structural Standards

Large industries and retail brands are able to establish standards for their suppliers and projects, making them public for consumers (BROWN, 2021). This is the case, for example, with Sephora's Clean + Planet Positive standards. The development of standards, guidelines, and classifications for sustainable products is crucial (as already available for corporate practices, e.g., GRI, Global Compact) (DANGELICO; PONTRANDOLFO, 2010). As well, the uniformization of national guidelines regarding advertising claims, labeling issues, terminology, among others (ELLEN et al, 1991). This should be carried by consumer protection agencies or technical standardization agencies, making them accessible to consumers and facilitating clear consumer understanding in the purchasing process.

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