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Communication Role of Eco-labels – the Example of Cosmetic Web Shops in Hungary

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Abstract: Consumer trends show that environmentally friendly features of the products are more important nowadays – especially at those product groups that could directly harm the health of the consumers. Consumption of cosmetics has continuously been increasing – not only because the personal usage grows, but also, because men shows higher attention to these products now than before. Therefore, it would be important to turn this higher demand toward those cosmetic products, which has lower or no negative effect on the environment. Eco-friendly labels could help customers to find the right solution to their problems. The aim of this study is to examine how much Hungarian cosmetic web shops help their potential customers to choose among natural or environmentally friendly alternatives by giving information on the eco-labels featured by the products/brands. For that, this exploratory study tries to identify the different types of communication forms of eco-labels. The analysis of the offerings and communication of 22 environmentally-friendly/natural/organic cosmetic web shops shows a fragmented picture. Three different levels of eco-label communication have been identified but only a few of these web shops emphasise the eco-labels and there direct meanings to the visitors.

Keywords: eco-labels; cosmetic web shops; online communication; communication typology; exploratory study

1 Introduction

In 2021, the UN recognized the right to a clean and healthy environment as a human right. The text was passed with 43 votes in favour and 4 abstentions from Russia, India, China and Japan (Farge 2021). This global step reflects to the movement and trend that people around the world express their need to a safer world and for safe products and it also shows their respect for nature.

Cosmetics Europe, the European trade association for the cosmetics and personal care sector (including Beiersdorf, Colgate-Palmolive, Henkel, Unilever, P&G, Chanel, L’Oreal and others) represents big producers on the fields of skin care, oral care, hair care, body care products, decorative cosmetics, sun care products and



perfumes. According to their report, the cosmetics sector employs around 1.8 million people in Europe and adds at least € 29 billion a year to the European economy. There are about 4,600 SMEs in the sector (European Commission). The largest national markets for cosmetics and personal care products within Europe are Germany (€14 billion), France (€11.5 billion), the UK (€9.8 billion), Italy (€9.7 billion), Spain (€6.4 billion) and Poland (€3.8 billion). (Cosmetics Europe, 2020).

In the EU, cosmetics industry made big steps toward harmonization of legislation: in 2009 directives were changed to regulation and from 2013, the EU banned animal testing of cosmetics products and cosmetic ingredients and also selling of cosmetics tested on animals. (Cosmetics Europe, 2020) That means, that using such claim on the product is a form of greenwashing, because the brand communicates something what is not a real virtue or a special feature because the legislation dictates it and it cannot be otherwise.

Certification system should help both consumers and environmental-friendly product producers for differentiating the more sustainable products. Eco-labels (1) can summarize the important information into one “picture” which makes easier for the customer to make decision, (2) increases trust, (3) helps to differentiate among products and companies, (4) based on that, it intensifies competition among producers and (5) boosts research and development.

2 Literature Review

Products are more and more complicated and consumers don't have enough knowledge understand how cosmetics are made and what are the effects and side-effects of their ingredients. Therefore, consumers needs support to compare products to each other and select the suitable variant for them. Eco-labels and green signals can help consumers in this process.

Atkinson and Rosenthal experimental study (2014) examined the governmental or corporate labels and their specification (specific or general) – with the condition of low and high product involvement. Findings show that “specific arguments consistently yield greater eco-label trust and positive attitudes toward the product and label source, but only with low-involvement products is source important, with corporate labels yielding more positive attitudes”. (Atkinson & Rosenthal, 2014 p.33).

Recently, 455 eco-labels exist worldwide. (Ecolabel index) There are two basic groups of eco-labels based on the features they highlight: one-dimensional and multi-dimensional labels. One-dimensional labels give information on a given feature of the products or the package (energy efficiency, raw material, special ingredient-free) (Darnall & Aragón-Correa, 2014). The advantage of one-



dimensional eco-labels is their clear meaning for the customer: they reflect to the important question the customer would ask. Is there silicon in the product? Is it vegan? – and the answer is given in an easily understandable way, with a stamp-like picture.

One-dimensional eco-labels have some disadvantages, too. First, such one-dimensional labels can create the “halo-effect” which can mislead the customers. For example, if a cosmetics is paraben-free and this logo is on the product, perhaps the consumer may think that other features of the product are also environmentally-friendly. Another problem is the vast number of competing labels at a same product type which create confusion for the customers and makes the whole system less effective. (Darnall & Aragón-Correa, 2014)

Multi-dimensional labels express environmental friendliness in a quantified form based on percentages, rankings or scores. These labels can be national or supranational labels and they reflect to the detailed analysis of the environmental impact of the product based on a life-cycle analysis. The process of being awarded by a multi-dimensional eco-label can be costly for the producer. (Iraldo et al, 2020)

The official EU flower trademark has criteria for absorbent hygiene products (e.g. diapers) and for rinse-off cosmetic products within the personal care product category. (European Commission) Hungarian companies show low determination to get this logo: now only 7 firms’ 13 products can use this certification and none of them are cosmetics or skincare products (Herman Otto Intézet 2021a).

The situation in Hungary concerning the usage of national multi-dimensional eco-labels (the official trademark is the Hungarian Cedar) is quite disappointing. Only the criteria for rinse-off cosmetic products (e.g. soap, shampoo, conditioners and shaving products) is available and translated into Hungarian, and nowadays there is no product in this category which is certified (Herman Otto Intézet 2021b). Unfortunately, the tendency is quite clear – at the moment, only 13 products has the right to show the cedar logo and their number has been decreasing constantly.

The reason can be that those who got the certification earlier could not profit from it because the government or the NGO-s did not support the introduction and familiarization of the Green Cedar. As they could not realize competitive advantage from the trademark, competitors were not motivated to get the certification.

Another way of differentiating eco-labels is based on their authenticity: the label can be a self-made one – created by the company itself, or it can be proven by third party, and can be awarded by NGOs or by the government. Online shops can also create their own stamp-like pictograms to communicate product features.

The results of a recent consumer study show that trust plays an important role in the efficiency of labelling policy: consumers trust in government and environmental NGOs certified or uncertified labels, but they don’t trust in firms own labelling



practice – even if it is a business-alliance created label – only if independent third-party auditors give approval to them. Therefore independency factor plays an important role in the believability of these eco-labels. (Darnall et al. 2018)

However, there are other basic factors/conditions which can modify the effectiveness of eco-labelling: they are (1) the previous knowledge of customer about environmental/health problems and their relationship with the products (2) the previous knowledge of the origin of eco-labels and (3) consumer attitude toward environment protection.

The latest data from the EU Eurobarometer study (Spring, 2021) shows that for the Hungarians health issues and environmental problems have different importance in their life than for the EU population. For Hungarians health issues (41% mentioned) are the second most important problems (following the cost of living- 45%) while environment, and climate change are on the 8th place in the row (9% mentioned). For the EU 27 countries, health issues (28%) are the most important, and environmental and climate change problems are the fifth most important ones (18%) with much smaller difference from the first-mentioned problem. (Eurobarometer, 2021) These remarkable differences highlight the distinct conditions in which eco-labels can influence buying decisions.

Last, but not least, information provided about the products plays more important role in online buying situations when potential customer makes her decision without the real presence of the product or without the help of the shop-assistant.

Buying online through web shops has advantages and disadvantages for the customers. The most important advantage is convenience which means saving energy and money – and staying home has special value in these pandemic times. Web shops also operate 24/7, which helps the customer to choose among the products at any time, which suits her (Wolfenbarger & Gilly, 2001). Another positive attribution is the information-providing factor. For the customer it is also important, that she/he can get to know and compare the whole product supply and product features on that way. This benefit is more visible if the page has product-comparison function. Moreover, web shops can also provide customer feedbacks on the product page– in text form or/and with ratings. This electronic word-of-mouth communication means more credible and direct information for the potential customers than the company's own advertisements. Some web shops also provide the facility to use filters for products search based on consumer preferences such as price-range, brand, ingredient and product type.

Among disadvantages, the most relevant one is the lack of trial, lack of product experience. Although nowadays there are special programs to overcome this difficulty, it still holds back consumers to buy online. Other issue is the security questioned in connection with the payment process. Time can be mentioned from a negative point of view, because delivery of the ordered product takes time and



sometimes, stock information is not accurate which ends in disappointment (Rohm & Swaminathan, 2004). Finally, the information overload could create problems because more information does not necessarily means being better informed (Li, 2016). Concerning the research aim of this paper, information overload could be decreased by providing the picture of eco-labels and certifications of green cosmetics instead of providing long list of detailed texts about the product.

3 Methods

3.1 Research aim

The aim of this article is to show the different approaches and practices of web shops to communicate about the eco-labels of their products. Eco-labels are able to show reliable, important information for the customers in a very compressed form. This qualitative study tries to explore the different levels of communicating eco-labels of cosmetics products and attempts to categorize them.

3.2 Sample

Selection of the web shops examined here based on the following methodology: three search terms were used (in Hungarian): “environmentally-friendly cosmetic web shops”, “natural cosmetics web shops” and “organic cosmetics web shops”. Number of search results shows significant difference: for the search term “natural cosmetic web shops” Google showed 291.000 results, while it could list 87.500 results for “environmentally-friendly cosmetic web shops” term and 35.300 for “organic cosmetic web shops” term. In the second step, those web shops has been selected which appeared on the first page as organic search results. Organic search results has the highest importance because their appearance based on their relevance to the search term and reliable search engine optimisation techniques. Moreover, customers also show high attention to the first-page results, and especially, the first three organic search ranking positions result in over 50% of all click-through (Hollingsworth 2021).

After selecting the first-page organic search results, the overlaps have been filtered out. From the first-page 9 environmentally-friendly, 10 natural and 9 organic cosmetics websites 6 web shops’ names appeared twice on the list, so the final sample consisted of 22 green cosmetic web shops. However, two of them were under construction, therefore 20 green cosmetics websites entered into the analysis phase. Table 1 provides sample description.



Table 1. Description of examined green cosmetics web shops (n.a. – not available)

Web shop name	Search term			Start of operation	Web shop type
	Env. fr. cosm.	Natural cosm.	Organic cosm.		
okokucko.hu	X	X		2011	Multipurpose green
zoldtudatos.hu	X			2020	Multipurpose green
anyabioboltja.hu	X			2019	Multipurpose green
zoldbolt.hu	X			2007	Multipurpose green
netbio.hu	X			2013	Multipurpose green
humanityaruhaz.hu	X	X		2013	Multipurpose green
magyarspajz.hu	X			2015	Multipurpose
zoldpolc.hu	X	X		2009	Multipurpose green
bionagyker.com	X	X		2009	Multipurpose
naturkence.hu		X		2011	Multipurpose green
naturangyal.hu		X		2014	Multipurpose green
medinatural.hu		X	X	2008	Brand store
cosmio.hu		X		2009	Green cosmetics
krempatika.hu		X		2017	Brand store
szepsegdrogeria.hu		X	X	2009	Green cosmetics
naurel.hu			X	UNDER CONSTRUCTION	
bcombio.hu			X	NO ACCESS	
blueberry-cosmetics.hu			X	2012	Green cosmetics
mandulina.hu			X	n.a.	Brand store
okoazis.hu			X	2016	Multipurpose green
notino.hu			X	2008	Multipurpose
naturalskin.hu			X	2011	Green cosmetics

Source: Authors' construction

4 Results

The systematic analysis of the selected web shop pages showed difference in how and in what details they communicate on the website concerning eco-labels. Basically, three communication levels of eco-labels has been identified: product/brand category level (level A); product variant-level (level B), and web shop level (level C) communication. Communication types were also categorize into 3 groups: the environmentally-friendly information can be communicated only in text form, only in image form or in a mixed form (image and text). In the following section, examples of these communication forms are shown.

4.1 Product-/brand-category related (Level A) eco-label communication

Product/brand category level communication of eco-labels (called level A) are extremely important, as web shops frequently provide search opportunities on their page for customers, and this process automatically makes the competition more intensive between products and brands, therefore, showing eco-labels at this stage is definitely worth doing. This direct competition also exists based on the categorized product supply in the menu of the web shop.

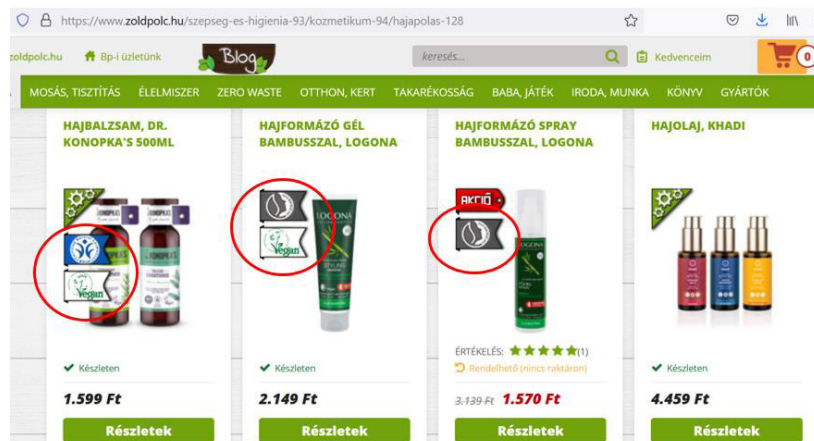


Figure 1

Communication of eco-labels at Level A

(product-/brand-category) (red-circle-highlights from the author)

Source: Zöldpolc (2021) available: [zoldpolc.hu/szepseg-es-higienia-93/kozmetikum-94/hajapolas-128](https://www.zoldpolc.hu/szepseg-es-higienia-93/kozmetikum-94/hajapolas-128)

Unfortunately, in majority of the cases websites did not use this opportunity to highlight the green feature of their products. Category-level introduction of products is limited to name, product picture and price – sometimes availability and customer satisfaction information can also be seen. However, even in this case, the image of the product may provide also image of the eco-label, as they regularly shown in the front of the product package.

Figure 1 shows that in the ideal form, eco-labels are highlighted at category level, at the picture of the products. The message of this arrangement is that eco-label is an important feature of the product and it is also important for the customer and for the web shop.

At this category-level, we have found the most advanced method at zoldpolc.hu. On that page, it is possible to search based on the eco-label types (see the red circle on

the figure 2). That gives the highest importance of eco-labels as based on a search like that, non-certified product variants cannot enter into the decision making process of the customer. Unfortunately, only one of the examined web shops applies this solution (namely, zoldpolc.hu). That online shop also provide filter based on country of origin. Usage and buying of local products also helps to protect the environment.

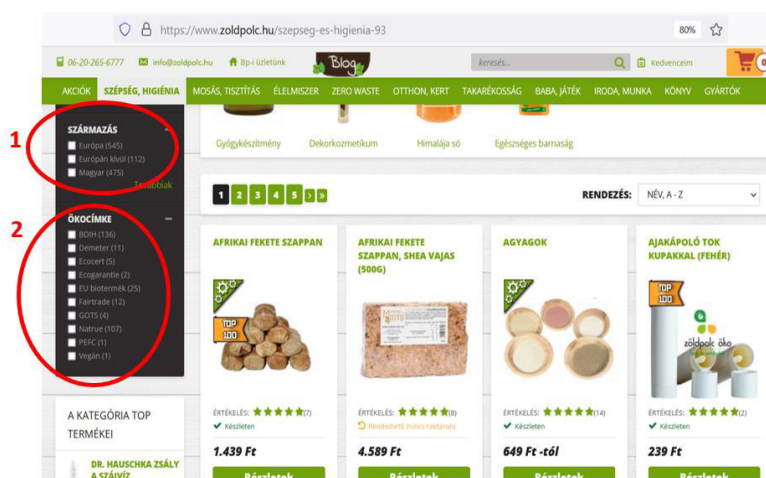


Figure 2

Chance for search based on eco-labels

(red-circle-highlights from the author – 1- country of origin 2- eco-label filter)

Source: Zöldpolc (2021) available: <https://www.zoldpolc.hu/szepseg-es-higienia-93>

4.2 Product related (Level B) eco-label communication

Level B appearance is connected directly to the product variant, so if the consumer visit the page of the selected product, he/she can see the eco-label there. Here the customer has the opportunity to read the detailed product description, the ingredients of the product and to read longer textual information provided by the web shop.

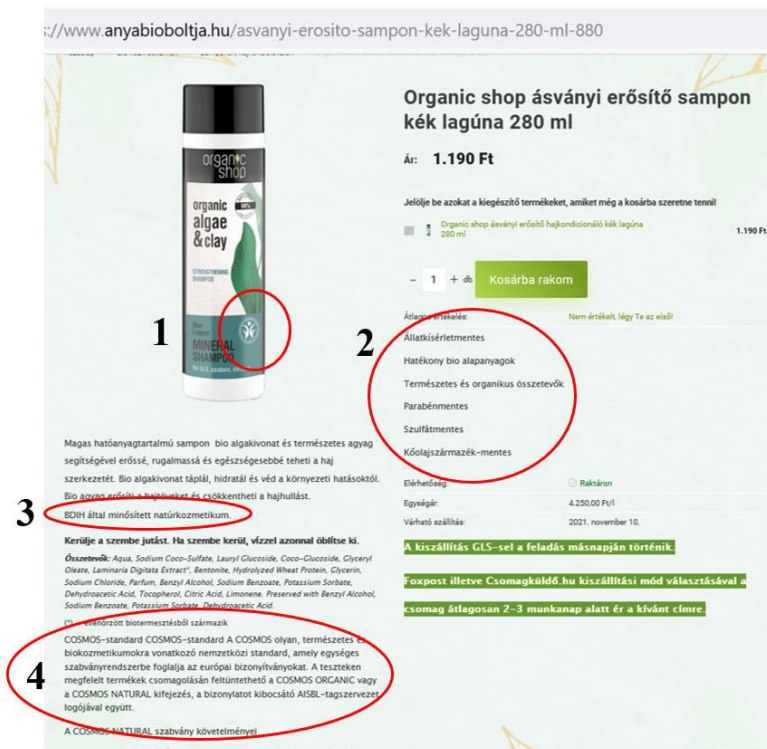


Figure 3

Communication of eco-labels at Level B
(red-circle-highlights from the author)

Source: Anya bioltja (2021) available: <https://www.anyabioltja.hu/asvanyi-erosito-sampon-kek-laguna-280-ml-880>

Figure 3 shows that there are several ways of communication of the certified green features of the product variant. The first chance is to show the product image, which regularly displays the eco-label. The second red-circle shows text information about the product green features: not tested on animals, natural and organic ingredients, effective bio ingredients, paraben-free, silicon-free, petroleum-free. The third circle highlights the information that the product is BDIH certified, while the paragraph in the fourth red circle explains the meaning of COSMOS standard in a detailed way.

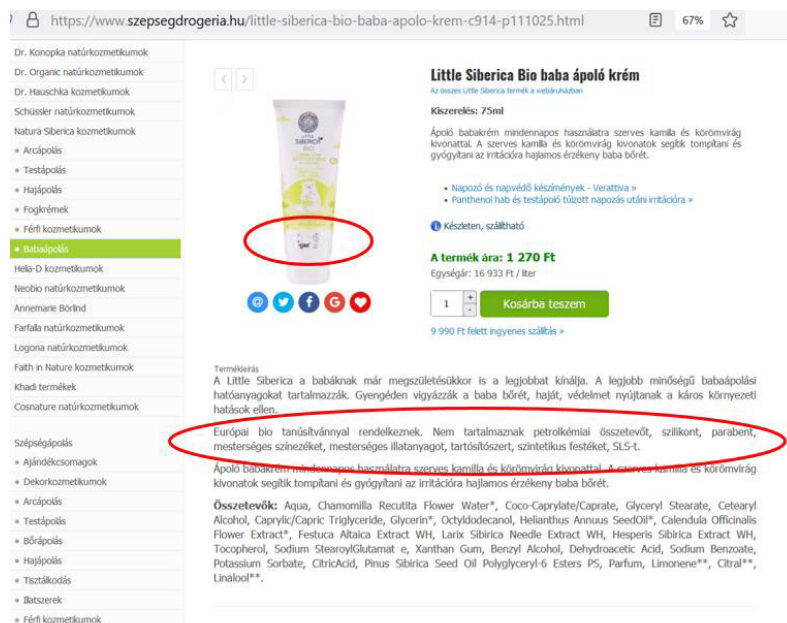


Figure 4 Sample of eco-label communication at level B (product-variant) (highlights in red circles from the author)

Source: Szépség drogéria (2021) available:

<https://www.szepsegdrogeria.hu/little-siberica-bio-baba-apolo-krem-c914-p111025.html>

Figure 4 shows the site of a baby cream, which has COSMOS Organic and Vegan certifications. For the producer these are important features based on the fact, that these logos are on the front of the product package. However, the web shop does not highlight these logos, there is no detailed description of the eco-labels, but there is a textual explanation at product-description: “*They have a European bio certificate. They do not contain petrochemical ingredient, silicone, paraben, artificial colouring, artificial fragrance, preservative, synthetic paint, SLS.*” (Szépségdrogéria 2021) It seems that the list of the one-dimensional information in text form can be understood more easily for the customers than a complex logo.

4.3 Web shop-related (Level C) eco-label communication

Level C communication of eco-labels focuses more on the trustworthiness and relevance of the web shops on two ways: (1) emphasising that they dedicate themselves totally to green cosmetics and (2) beside selling products they try to educate consumers by providing detailed information on the meaning of different eco-labels. Level C detailed eco-label communication do not only related to products but improves the web shop’s image.



Figure 5 Communication of eco-labels at Level C
(web shop-related) (red circle highlight from the author)

Source: Blueberry cosmetics (2021) available: <https://www.blueberry-cosmetics.hu/>

Figure 5 shows that blueberry-cosmetics sells product with COSMOS and Vegan eco-labels. These general statements however, can be the basis for greenwashing in case of not all the products are certified. They also emphasise their commitment with the slogan “you can find only clean cosmetics on our website”, however, “clean” is not a technical term in the cosmetic industry.

Although people may think that fierce competition motivates firms to be more innovative and environmentally friendly, it can also be the reason for greenwashing. Unfortunately, among the examined cosmetics web shops we could detect a form of greenwashing: namely the worshipping of false labels. On the left hand side on Figure 6 eco-label-like pictograms can be seen with short description “cruelty-free, vegan, silicon-free”, however these pictograms are self-made ones and are not the official logos of these product features. Customers can be easily misled by such deliberate actions – even if these are true features of companies’ products, but they are not proven by an independent third-party institution.



Figure 6 Communication of fake/self-made eco-labels at Level C
(web shop-related) (red circle highlight from the author)

Source: Krémpatika (2021) available: <https://krempatika.hu/arcapolas>

5 Discussion

The analysis of the eco-label communication through the most relevant green cosmetic web shops shows a mixed picture. Typical criticism toward web shops in general, that they don't provide enough information on the product variants and therefore potential customers feel higher risk to make a purchase decision. For example, Ökokuckó sells Boho cosmetics on its page, which has Bio and Ecocert certifications but it does not show these eco-labels. Our main impression was similar: green cosmetic web shops do not communicate eco-labels on an efficient and highlighted way.

The other problem when the product does not have official certification but the web shop creates self-made label-like pictograms. The latter – for sure – is more dangerous for the green cosmetics market.

The other quite common phenomenon is to communicate one-dimensional green character of the product in text form. It is possible, that the examined web shops – as defined natural / organic / environmentally-friendly – do not highlight the eco-labels because (1) the name of the web shop has already have this message and this information is enough for the consumers, (2) consumers don't know the meaning of the labels (3) and as a consequence, it is better to communicate the relevant information in the product description in text form.

Another aspect which may play a role in this practice is that it is not sure that consumers trust the labels. Scepticism toward green claims can be the consequence of former misleading practice of green cosmetic firms.

Table 2. Eco-label categories found at the examined web shops (SM- self-made; Multip.- Multipurpose)

Web shop name	Level of eco-label communication				Search term			Web shop supply
	A (category level)	B (product level)	C (web shop level)	Other	Envirr.fr.	Natural .	Organic	
zoldpolc.hu	Image	Mixed			X	X		Multip. green
okoazis.hu	Text	Mixed					X	Multip. green
netbio.hu	Text	Text			X			Multip. green
bionagyker.com	Text	Text			X	X		Multip. green
anyabioboltja.hu		Mixed			X			Multip. green
zoldbolt.hu		Mixed			X			Multip. green
naturangyal.hu		Mixed				X		Multip. green
notino.hu		Mixed					X	Multip.
naturalskin.hu		Text	Text				X	Green cosmetics
okokucko.hu		Text			X	X		Multip. green
zoldtudatos.hu		Text			X			Multip. green
szepsegdrogeria.hu		Text				X	X	Green cosmetics
blueberry-cosmetics.hu		Mixed	Mixed				X	Green cosmetics
humanityaruhaz.hu				No labels	X	X		Multip. green
magyarspajz.hu				No labels	X			Multip.
naturkence.hu				SM text		X		Multip. green
medinatural.hu				SM text		X	X	Brand store
cosmio.hu				SM text		X		Green cosm.
krempatika.hu				SM image		X		Brand store
mandulina.hu				SM text			X	Brand store

Source: Author's construction



Beside the lack of relevant information and the potential greenwashing, too much information also can cause problem on a webpage. Too much information may also cause difficulty for the consumer to make efficient decision and do not waste too much time for analysing the supply carefully. (Product comparison sites provide solution for this problem.)

Only a few websites showed the sign of creating information overload. If the web shop wants to avoid information overload it should communicate the eco-label which compresses the information into one image. However, this way of communication can be effective only if consumers know the meaning of these logos. Education of consumers – and also people in general – about the meaning of eco-labels are the responsibility of the government, ministry and industry organizations. Unfortunately, in Hungary there is no or just rare social marketing campaigns which aim to let these eco-labels known by the customers.

Summarizing all the findings, we can say that only a few web shop use both category/brand- and product-level eco-label communication. Those who serve information at both levels show higher commitment to sustainability. All of these web shops were multipurpose green online shops, what means that they serve not only cosmetics but household cleaning products, ingredients, food and zero-waste solutions. Some of these web shops (like zöldpolc) show real commitment to the green issues on other ways: they also use environmentally friendly packaging and/or provide carbon-neutral transport (ökoázis).

The second group provides eco-label information at product level - in text or in mixed form. Product level eco-label information. Two of them also communicate at web shop level: the form of the communication is the same as at the product level.

7 out of the 20 web shops belongs to the third group: majority of these websites promote natural cosmetics which means that they sell ingredients to home-made cosmetics or they make cosmetics on their own not only sell them. They don't show eco-labels at product or at category-levels. All brand-stores (mandulina.hu, krematika.hu and medinatural.hu) implements this strategy. They are small Hungarian firms, which mix cosmetics from natural ingredients. Probably they are too small to undergo the certification process. The problem is that these firms use technical terms (like natural, bio, organic) without proving it. Moreover, they create self-made eco-label-like pictograms, which are able to mislead the consumers (Figure 6).

Majority of the green cosmetics web shops provide information in text form about one-dimensional green features like paraben-free, silicon-free, cruelty-free. Perhaps it makes easier for the customer to focus on one or two product features and made product decision on them rather than analysing all the pros and cons related to the products. Not surprisingly, simplicity pays off: one-dimensional eco-label messages are more easier to be understood by the customers.



Conclusions

After this exploratory phase of the research, a quantitative study could show the proportion of the eco-label communication types among the existing web shops and can find out which types of communication is more effective among potential customers. Further analysis could examine and prove the consumers' knowledge on eco-labels, and the importance of this information in their buying decisions.

Another direction of following research should analyse environmentally-friendly cosmetic web shops owners' design decisions on what type of information and how they provide about the green products.

Just at the time of writing this article, the European Commission makes it possible to all cosmetic product types to get the EU flower certification. (Commission Decision, 2021) Till these days, only rinse-off cosmetics (hair shampoo, conditioners, body wash) could be awarded by the EU flower but now deodorant, sunscreens, body and facial creams can also use this differentiating way of proving the sustainability of their products to the customers. “.. ***the expansion of the eco-label to new categories could help fight greenwashing*** which, according to the NGO, is proliferating in the cosmetics industry, with “three out of four products in the EU displaying an environmental claim or label.” (Gallon 2021)

This paper was able to categorize eco-label communication types among web shops. However, another direction of development would be using negative labelling instead of positive ones – especially because a study shows that negative ethical labelling has more effect on attitude and preference than positive labelling (Dam & Jonge, 2015).

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