Sustainability is out. What drives the beauty industry instead?

📆 **Data collection** | November 2025
🌍 **Sample** | 1 000 people representing the Dutch online population
💄 **Category** | Beauty & body care

Dear marketer,

In an era where "green" is often the default strategy, we set out to answer a critical strategic question: **Can cosmetic brands still count on sustainability to drive their growth?**

This report is designed to help you move beyond assumptions and understand what motivates today's consumers.

By analyzing the relative strength of brand associations for major players like **Rituals, The Body Shop,** and **L'Oréal**, we reveal why sustainability may no longer be the growth engine it once was and where the real opportunities for market penetration now lie.

Whether you are managing a small niche brand or a global market leader, this presentation provides actionable recommendations to protect your brand health and focus your media budget where it will have the greatest impact.

Hope you find these insights helpful,

Jiri Boudal, CEO and Brand Expert @ Behavio

Key insight: Beauty consumers prioritize needs beyond sustainability.

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Sustainability is out in the beauty industry.

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***Small* brands shouldn't bother with sustainability at all**

☝️

***Large* brands should keep sustainability in mind.**

Consumers primarily seek *high quality*, *well-being*, and *luxury*.

Needs associated with sustainability are important for less than 40% of category buyers.

The niche window for sustainability has closed.

Established brands like Rituals and The Body Shop are already strongly associated with this need, making it an inefficient strategy for new or other brands.

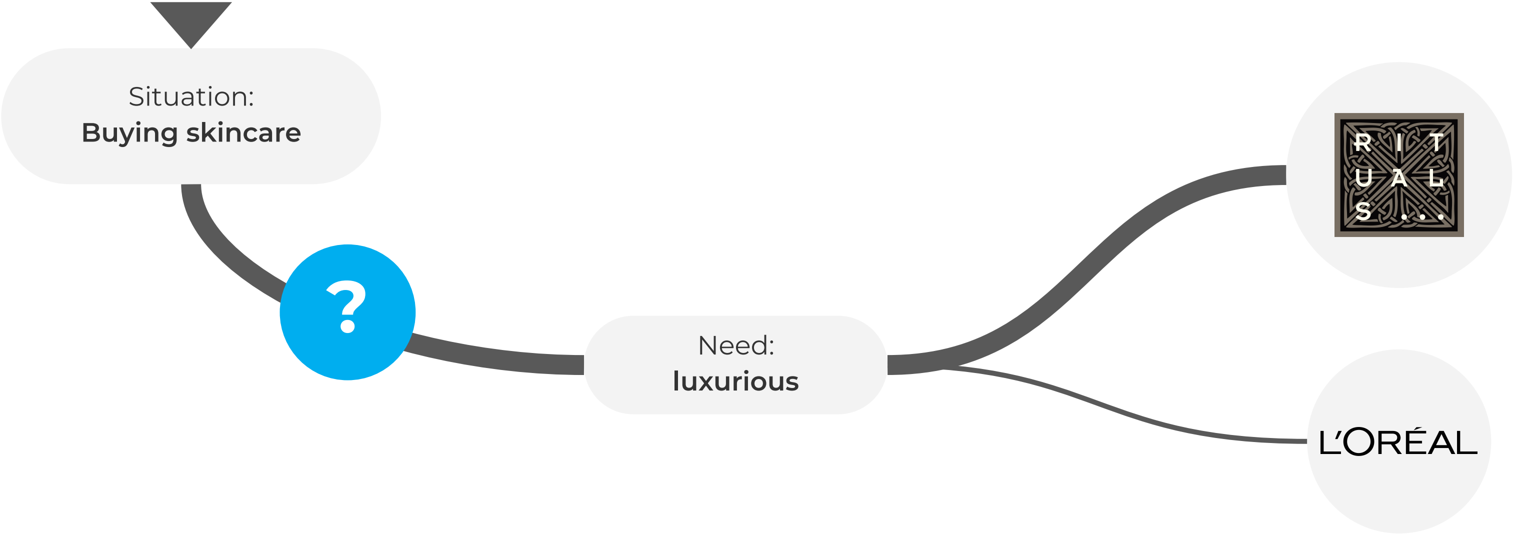
Sustainability won't drive growth, but large brands still need to pay attention to it.

Allocating some time and budget to it protects the brand from erosion and keeps customers from switching to a competitor.

Method: What did this research measure?

People spontaneously recall a strong brand as a suitable solution to their needs in a shopping situation.

In this research, we aim to understand **what is important** to people when buying *skincare*, or rather, **what needs** brands should address.



Method: What does this analysis measure regarding needs?

The greatest potential lies in needs that are **sufficiently important, deficient, and are not dominated by the competition**. In these, there is potential to differentiate oneself from the competition and build brand awareness and salience as effectively as possible.

NEEDS IMPORTANCE

This metric measures what is key to people when buying a product or service. It defines the needs a successful brand must fulfill, providing an overview of the group dealing with a specific need.

NEEDS DEFICIT

The research measures how well people manage to satisfy individual needs, highlighting the portion of people who feel a need is unmet. This deficit holds potential for a brand.

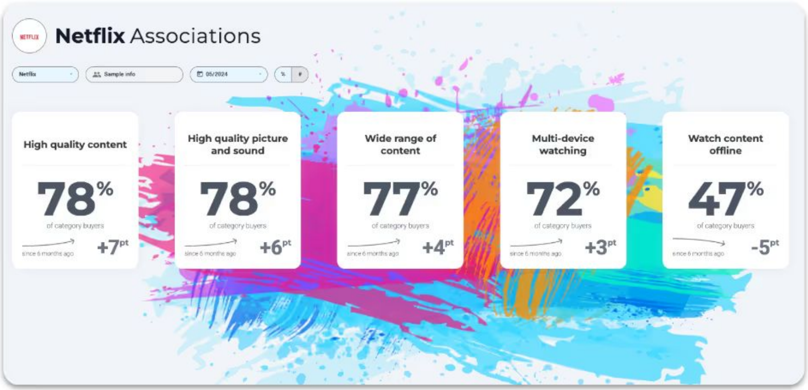
BRAND ASSOCIATION

The analysis tests which brands people associate with the needs.
It reveals how brands occupy those needs, the relative strength of a brand, and areas where no brand currently dominates.

Method: How was this research conducted?

Task, don't ask. Behavioral science shows that visuals often have a greater impact than words. That's why we don't just track what people say about your brand—we measure what they instinctively associate with your brand assets.

Here's what that looks like:



The data used in this research was collected in **November 2025** from a sample of **1 000 individuals representative of the Dutch online population**.

The Strategic Question:

Can brands count on sustainability to grow?

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The beauty industry is still booming globally.

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USD
~450 billion
estimated size of
global beauty industry

💚

USD
~40–50 billion
estimated size of
sustainable personal care products

Source: McKinsey (2025), Fortune Business Insights (2025)

But can sustainability still be used as a growth engine in cosmetics?

No, not really.
Here’s why.

Long-term growth requires associating a brand/product with important customers’ needs.

Sustainability is **not** one of them.

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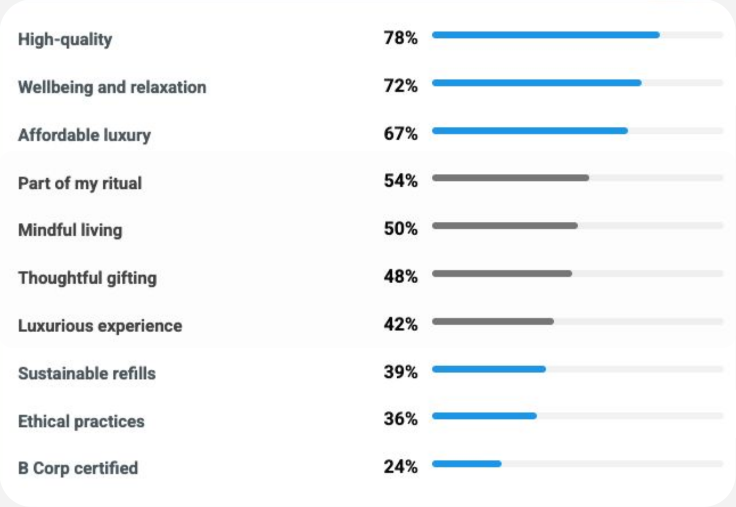
Customers don’t generally need their beauty products to be sustainable.



Consumers are motivated by these three key factors.

Sustainability-related needs are currently not as important.

Source: Behavio, Nov 2025, 1000 respondents (NL nat. rep.)

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Here’s why association with sustainability *has* worked previously.

THE BODY SHOP

For small brands (e.g. **The Body Shop** originally), the association previously worked because it allowed them to target an "unimportant need" as a niche.

This allowed them to own a specific market segment that larger brands ignored, enabling the small brand to establish a footing.

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The niche window has since closed. Sustainability now belongs to Rituals.

	Need importance	RITUALS...
High-quality	78%	78%
Wellbeing and relaxation	72%	76%
Affordable luxury	67%	61%
Part of my ritual	54%	47%
Mindful living	50%	58%
Thoughtful gifting	48%	79%
Luxurious experience	42%	75%
Sustainable refills	39%	53%
Ethical practices	36%	54%
B Corp certified	24%	44%

The niche strategy only works if the customer need is **available** – meaning no competitor has a strong link to it.

The data, however, shows that **Rituals** now holds a **53–54%** link to these needs.

A new small brand **should not** use sustainability as an opportunity.
It would be inefficient.

Source: Behavio, Nov 2025, 1000 respondents (NL nat. rep.)

The Current Situation:
Who’s the true sustainable leader?

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Consumers primarily link their top three needs to Rituals, Douglas, and L'Oréal.

NEED	NEED IMPORTANCE	RITUALS	DOUGLAS	L'ORÉAL	THE BODY SHOP	LUSH	L'OCCITANE
High-quality	78%	78%	69%	63%	42%	20%	11%
Wellbeing and relaxation	72%	76%	61%	60%	47%	19%	10%
Affordable luxury	67%	61%	52%	52%	38%	15%	9%
Part of my ritual	54%	47%	29%	31%	17%	8%	4%
Mindful living	50%	58%	38%	38%	44%	15%	8%
Thoughtful gifting	48%	79%	70%	54%	45%	22%	9%
Luxurious experience	42%	75%	61%	54%	37%	18%	9%
Sustainable refills	39%	53%	34%	31%	41%	17%	6%
Ethical practices	36%	54%	38%	38%	41%	16%	8%
B Corp certified	24%	44%	34%	35%	31%	12%	8%

Source: Behavio, Nov 2025, 1000 respondents (NL nat. rep.), category buyers

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People do associate Rituals with sustainability. But there's a caveat.

	Need importance	RITUALS	DOUGLAS	L'ORÉAL	THE BODY SHOP	LUSH	L'OCCITANE
High-quality	78%	-3%	7%	4%	-8%	-1%	0%
Wellbeing and rela...	72%	-2%	1%	3%	-1%	-1%	0%
Affordable luxury	67%	-3%	2%	5%	-1%	-2%	0%
Part of my ritual	54%	8%	-1%	3%	-7%	-2%	-1%
Mindful living	50%	1%	-7%	-4%	9%	1%	1%
Thoughtful gifting	48%	0%	8%	-4%	-4%	1%	-1%
Luxurious experie...	42%	3%	5%	1%	-8%	-1%	0%
Sustainable refills	39%	2%	-6%	-6%	9%	3%	-1%
Ethical practices	36%	-2%	-5%	-3%	7%	2%	1%
B Corp certified	24%	-3%	-2%	1%	3%	0%	2%

Rituals has the highest *absolute* associations. But by looking at the **relative strength of brand–association links,** the picture is different.

The association with sustainability (e.g. +2% with *sustainable refills* and –2% with ethical practices) is simply "on par with brand size".

Rituals has high numbers only because it is a dominant brand **overall**.

Source: Behavio, Nov 2025, 1000 respondents (NL nat. rep.), category buyers

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The Body Shop effectively communicates sustainability – especially considering its size.

	Need importance	RITUALS	DOUGLAS	L'ORÉAL	THE BODY SHOP	LUSH	L'OCCITANE
High-quality	78%	-3%	7%	4%	-8%	-1%	0%
Wellbeing and rela...	72%	-2%	1%	3%	-1%	-1%	0%
Affordable luxury	67%	-3%	2%	5%	-1%	-2%	0%
Part of my ritual	54%	8%	-1%	3%	-7%	-2%	-1%
Mindful living	50%	1%	-7%	-4%	9%	1%	1%
Thoughtful gifting	48%	0%	8%	-4%	-4%	1%	-1%
Luxurious experie...	42%	3%	5%	1%	-8%	-1%	0%
Sustainable refills	39%	2%	-6%	-6%	9%	3%	-1%
Ethical practices	36%	-2%	-5%	-3%	7%	2%	1%
B Corp certified	24%	-3%	-2%	1%	3%	0%	2%

Although not the largest brand, The Body Shop strategically "owns" this topic best **relative to its size.**

The Body Shop scores +9% for *sustainable refills* and +7% for *ethical practices*.

👍 Customers associate the brand with sustainability **much more strongly** than its market size would predict.

Source: Behavio, Nov 2025, 1000 respondents (NL nat. rep.), category buyers

Surprisingly, Lush is facing an unexpected weakness.

	Need importance	RITUALS	DOUGLAS	L'ORÉAL	THE BODY SHOP	LUSH	L'OCCITANE
High-quality	78%	-3%	7%	4%	-8%	-1%	0%
Wellbeing and rela...	72%	-2%	1%	3%	-1%	-1%	0%
Affordable luxury	67%	-3%	2%	5%	-1%	-2%	0%
Part of my ritual	54%	8%	-1%	3%	-7%	-2%	-1%
Mindful living	50%	1%	-7%	-4%	9%	1%	1%
Thoughtful gifting	48%	0%	8%	-4%	-4%	1%	-1%
Luxurious experie...	42%	3%	5%	1%	-8%	-1%	0%
Sustainable refills	39%	2%	-6%	-6%	9%	3%	-1%
Ethical practices	36%	-2%	-5%	-3%	7%	2%	1%
B Corp certified	24%	-3%	-2%	1%	3%	0%	2%

Lush's link to sustainability is above average relative to the brand's size (+3% in *sustainable refills*, +2% in *ethical practices*).

These numbers, however, are **poor for a company that heavily promotes** its environmental commitment.

❗ While likely strong within a niche core, Lush fails to project this association to the broader category buyer.

Source: Behavio, Nov 2025, 1000 respondents (NL nat. rep.), category buyers

Recommendations:

What should cosmetic brands focus on depending on their size?

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Small brands should (mostly) de-prioritize sustainability.

Small brands

(market penetration < 10%)

Small and starting brands should **not** build their brand primarily on sustainability unless they are targeting a micro-niche – people don't generally need their cosmetics to be sustainable, that window of opportunity has closed.

Smaller brands are better off either finding a **different niche** elsewhere or linking sustainability to a tangible product benefit (e.g., being artisanal or having specific ingredients).

Medium-sized brands should identify other, more important consumer needs.

Medium brands

(market penetration < 30%)

For medium-sized brands, it's not worth investing in sustainability as the **growth ceiling is low** – the topic is important to only approx. 36% of buyers.

A better strategy would be to identify and address **an important** (>60%), and a less-occupied consumer need. L'Oréal has seen similar success, when it focused on *affordable luxury*.

Large brands should focus on sustainability only as a secondary need.

Large brands

(market penetration > 30%)

Large brands shouldn't not spend your primary media budget here.

Instead, communicating sustainability helps protect their brand health from erosion and losing their customers to competitors.

The big wins, however, will be based on whether consumers consider a large brand of high quality and able to help them with their wellbeing.

Want to learn more?

Browse the data for yourself

Additional sources

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3. Precedence Research (2025). Natural and Organic Cosmetics Market Size, Share and Trends 2025 to 2034. [online] Available at: https://www.precedenceresearch.com/natural-and-organic-cosmetics-market [Accessed 17 Dec. 2025]