

Greenwashing in Digital Advertising:

A Study of Consumer Perception and Sustainability Awareness among Indian Youth.

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ABSTRACT

Greenwashing is becoming an issue of concern in modern marketing, especially in the digital media. The surging trend in new media and the rising awareness of the environmental sustainability among the youth in India has raised the exposure of green claims and greenwashing potentiality. This paper will analyze the Indian youth awareness of greenwashing, and will also relate this to the knowledge and behaviour of sustainability. Theories of communication used in understanding the effect of digital media, influencer marketing and cultural scripts on consumer attitudes towards green claims include the Agenda-Setting, Framing and Cultivation, and behavioural theories like the Theory of Planned Behavior. The research presents a gap in knowledge-practice and poor sustainability and regulatory literacy. It concludes that even as the sustainability claims continue to gain increasing power among the youth in India, they lack the necessary critical skills to effectively analyze these claims. The study provides recommendations to regulators, marketers and educators to improve marketing practices and consumer literacy in an ethical manner.

Keywords: *Greenwashing, Digital Advertising, Indian Youth, Sustainability Awareness, Consumer Perceptions , Consumer Literacy.*

INTRODUCTION

Environmental sustainability has increasingly been a key focus of global communication and marketing efforts in recent years, with brands increasingly promoting their products as "green". But this increased focus on "green" marketing has also given rise to greenwashing, a phenomenon where brands overstate, mislead or make false claims about the environmental attributes of their products or services. Although these claims are not so new, with the increased usage of digital media, the scope and influence of these claims have increased, making the assessment of environmental claims even more complicated.

The emergence of digital media (social media - Instagram, YouTube; e-commerce and influencer marketing) in India has changed the nature of advertising. They enable the possibility of selling sustainability in a visual and emotive manner. Such terms as natural, organic, environmentally friendly and chemical-free are widely used in advertisements, without any scientific evidence or verification. This results in consumers, in particular the youth, being subjected to more complex sustainability messages, which are not always reliable.

The Indian youth consumers are a very significant consumer segment since they are highly digital, brand aware and concerned about the environment. Nevertheless, despite the fact that they know about the problems of sustainability, they are not connected to their knowledge of sustainability and their assessment of green claims in advertising. This makes them more prone to greenwashing in the online environment.

In light of this, it is crucial to understand the perceptions of greenwashing in digital advertising among Indian youth and how these perceptions impact their awareness and behaviour towards sustainable consumption. This research seeks to understand the nexus between exposure to digital advertising, consumer perception, and sustainability literacy, and point out the influence of social influencers and regulatory knowledge in developing consumer perception.

RESEARCH PROBLEM

Internet advertising has acquired a much more sustainability-oriented tone within the last few years, as businesses work to place themselves as sustainable. Such expressions as eco-friendly, green, product, sustainable sourcing, and carbon neutral are becoming more commonly used in online advertisements, particularly on social sites which are trendy among youth in India. This is a global movement towards greater environmental consciousness, but has also led to a mushrooming of unverified, ambiguous or misleading environmental claims - or greenwashing - in advertising.

Although, the exposure of the Indian youth to such ads is very high, it does not mean that the youth are immune to them. Equipped with the critical and evaluative literacy skills to evaluate the veracity of these claims.

Although young consumers may be able to identify some words that are connected with sustainability and attractiveness. eco-friendly packaging, they may not have the necessary skills to interpret, evaluate and compare green processes and advertising statements. This results in a knowledge gap.

It becomes even more complex when it comes to the digital platform due to its fast-paced and computer-based nature accompanied by ads that are both aesthetically pleasing and offer little. data on where they were made, how they are certified or any environmental effects that they might cause.

Another challenge of separating when it comes to influence marketing and branded content. natural out of advertised material and true environmental assertions. All these render the young people in India especially vulnerable to greenwashing. As a result, misleading information concerning sustainability may impact consumer behavior and choices in a negative way. Therefore, there is need for concern regarding the gap between the awareness of sustainability and critical thinking abilities of the Indian youth in digital marketing.

OBJECTIVES

1. Assess the prevalence and channels of perceived greenwashing in digital advertising among Indian youth (18–30).
2. Examine the relationship between sustainability awareness and the ability to detect greenwashing.
3. Evaluate the impact of perceived greenwashing on brand trust and purchase intention.

RESEARCH QUESTIONS

1. How frequently and through which digital channels do Indian youth perceive greenwashing?
2. Does higher sustainability awareness improve detection of greenwashing among Indian youth?
3. How does perceived greenwashing influence brand trust and purchase intentions in this group?

LITERATURE REVIEW

The intentional act of creating false, unfounded or inflated claims is considered greenwashing claims about the environmental sustainability of a product, service or corporate practice, in a manner that implies falsely favorable environmental look. Greenwashing has evolved to be more subtle and difficult to spot in the current day advertisement, specially in the digital. environment. The brands use sustainability-filled words, images and symbology to make the product appear. enhancing their environmental performance without the related modification of their production, supply chain and environmental practices is typical.

Other works point out the rise of consumer consciousness of the environmental problem has been very crucial in determining how organizations communicate. In a market environment where being sustainable can be used as a strategy to gain competitive advantage, there can be an increased pressure on organisations to be seen as sustainable, even though they may not be . The prerogative of greenwashing is ascribed to three aspects; an outlook of the market, want, and want of enforcement of regulation connected to the environment and information asymmetries between companies and consumers. In the marketing platforms of social media where the media is visual, high speed and influential, such misleading perceptions can be quickly spread and influence consumer behaviour. This is particularly worrying to young consumers who are the active users of digital media.

and will probably be subjected to the influence of persuasive marketing techniques that may stretch the limits between true sustainability claims and exaggerated marketing claims.

In this research, some theories have been applied in explaining some of the features of communications and behavior that relate to the nature of digital advertising and its ability to clarify the development, sustainability messages interpretation, and behavioral responses of sustainability messages. According to agenda-setting theory, the media does not affect ideas we have, but what we think about. In digital advertising, the more messages of sustainability that are being conveyed, the higher the salience of the problem because of selectivity of information, which might not be well-researched or properly checked . The theory of framing also illustrates the process of making out of information. Marketers can position their products by invoking positive emotions which can consist of such terms as natural, etc. "green," or "Ayurvedic". This consequently leads to good consumer perceptions in the absence of scientific backing.

This can be supported by Cultivation Theory which explains that exposure of media messages above a level causes exposure to affect individuals. A period of time can have an impact on an individual's worldview. Within the scope of sustainability advertising in the online community, where they continuously see advertisements on social media and via digital adverts could contribute to sustainable practices perceptions as the norm among all industries in the long run. This might help in mitigating any additional questioning of unsustainable practices.

The gap in attitude and behaviour could be addressed by the Theory of Planned Behaviour. Though

People, particularly younger consumers, have attitudes towards sustainability and caring for the environment, the attitudes are not always followed by actions due to other circumstances, such as prices, convenience, peer pressure. Such inconsistencies can be capitalised on in advertising in sustainability marketing.

The Uses and Gratifications Theory reveals that in the context of the use of the online media, the audience can do there is some regulation in the consumption. Young people are not only using digital media in order to do what? knowledge, though to express oneself, amusement and social approvals. In this case, the content of the sustainable lifestyles forms part of the media presentation of the lifestyles, and consuming. becomes valuing self.

Finally, the Theory of Influencer Credibility applies as far as online advertisement is concerned. The credibility of the arguments regarding sustainability and other problems that the influencers advertise depends on their trustworthiness (attractiveness, likeability and authenticity). But this too renders the possibility for greenwashing more likely, as consumers might be less sceptical about their authenticity and trustworthiness.

Research Gap

The studies of greenwashing and consumer attitudes have provided some useful information on the subject of greenwashing impacts of misleading marketing on the choices and brand awareness of consumers. Although it has been the subject of previous research on the effect of green marketing, corporate communication is more likely to be confined to general or conventional advertising research, instead of much on the changing nature of digital media ecosystems.

To begin with, the research in digital-first advertising ecosystems, with a narrow focus on the research, is limited to where the production is hugely affected by algorithms, platform designs and real-time media distribution and intake of green messaging. While research recognises the increasing prominence of digital media, it doesn't fully explore how these ecosystems enhance or mask greenwashing. Second, the greenwashing led by influencers is less known. Even though the credibility of the sources and celebrity endorsement have received much attention, the rise of social media influencers as opinion leaders introduces other reasons of trust, identification and persuasion that are not emphasized in existing methods.

Thirdly, the sustainability literacy of young people has not been given a lot of attention particularly in India. Although other theories such as the Theory of Planned Behavior give prominence to the role of attitudes and conscious to subconscious, the present day research lacks on whether the young consumers have the critical thinking skills to examine the truthfulness of the environmental claims in ads.

Moreover, there is a lack of regulatory awareness in India. Although international research mentions ethical and financial consequences of greenwashing, there is a lack of research on the understanding

of the Indian consumers of the standards, policies or guidelines regarding claims in advertisements that are environmental.

Finally, the role of AI-powered personalised advertising in greenwashing has yet to be much explored. Data-driven personalization and algorithm-driven content are increasingly used by marketers recommendations, consumers are getting very targeted and personalized sustainability communication. But the impact of this personalization in advancing false pretensions or enticement.

How consumers can be brought out of complacency regarding sustainability claims is a question yet to be answered. To fill in these gaps, this paper aims to explore how digital advertising, influencer, works. marketing, sustainability and regulation awareness, and personalisation of consumers through AI young Indian attitude towards greenwashing.

METHODOLOGY

The current research uses a descriptive form of the research methodology to explore the occurrence of greenwashing in online media advertisements, and to ascertain sustainability awareness of Indian youth. This is a reasonable research design since it allows the systematic data collection and interpretation with the researcher observing and interpreting without any manipulation of variables, consumer behaviour. This method is very appropriate to detect trends, perceptions and attitudes towards green advertising.

The study targets the youth aged 18 to 30 years who live in India as they make up a strong collection of consumers in an assortment of online applications such as Instagram, YouTube and e-commerce websites where the green marketing strategies are widely adopted by their extensive digital .They are an appropriate sample to investigate the impact of greenwashing in the since they consume the media digital marketing landscape.

The reason why the respondents were chosen on a convenience basis is because of the practical reasons with convenience and time limitation. This method can limit the external although it can be limited to the results, it is suitable for descriptive and exploratory research where the goal is unknown is to investigate a new phenomenon.

The research collected primary data based on a questionnaire, distributed via Google Forms. The tool was used to determine the awareness; attitudes and behavior of the participants towards greenwashing online advertising. It had multiple choice as well as Likert-scale questions where either can be used quantitative and attitudinal measurements.

The questionnaire was further divided to respond to the key variables of interest. These included demographic information, media consumption, awareness of greenwashing, and impact of digital. advertisements on consumer attitudes/behaviour. This aided in streamlining the data collection and

understanding the relationships between the exposure of respondents towards digital media and their sustainability awareness.

FINDINGS

The discussion of the data obtained due to the research assists to present some valuable findings regarding perceptions of greenwashing, awareness of sustainability issues and consumer behavior in India. The results of the research are presented according to the key topics related to the research goals.

Awareness of Greenwashing

Based on the results of the study, a moderate percentage of respondents (approximately 58) were aware of the notion of greenwashing. Nevertheless, further analysis shows that the level of knowledge is quite superficial about the subject. Just about 32% of respondents were definite that they could differentiate deceptive and exaggerated news concerning environmental matters in advertisements. So, even as the idea of greenwashing continues to gain momentum, people still lack the expertise of how to analyze. This type of advertisement is lacking.

Exposure to Digital Advertising

The data is a clear indication that exposure of sustainability communications in digital media is extremely high. The majority of the respondents (approximately 92 percent) said that they see advertisements of eco-friendly/sustainable products rather commonly in social media (e.g., Instagram, Online shops and YouTube). Moreover, 76% of participants said that they are affected by the perception of influencers as compared to eco-friendly products. This implies that the online media possesses a major role in sustainability marketing i.e. agenda setting.

Scepticism, Perception and Trust

We find a complex scepticism and trust that are a complex combination of these two. On the one hand, 61% of the participants believed that brands are likely to overstate their sustainability activities. On the other hand, there were many respondents (54%) who trusted sustainability communications. In particular, most of the respondents discovered the sustainability endorsed by influencers communications to be trustworthy. It implies that people may be a bit sceptical about sustainability communications but still believe that they can be true because of their heuristic nature.

Consumer Behaviour and Purchase Decisions

As seen in the study, a significant difference exists between the attitudes and behaviors of youth in India to green consumerism. Even though almost two-thirds of the surveyed respondents claimed having positive attitudes towards environmentally-friendly products, in reality, they were, first of all, interested in practical considerations of how to make their purchases. In specific, almost 63% said that price was more important than sustainable attributes in the endeavor of making their decisions.

Additionally, 41 percent of respondents said that they always reviewed data given on the label prior to buying any commodities. Interestingly, there was a large percentage of the individuals who confessed to purchasing a product even though there was uncertainty on its sustainability claims.

Sustainability Literacy

Judging by the survey results, it was possible to note a rather low sustainability literacy level among the respondents. In particular, almost half of them knew some commonly used terminology related to sustainability (i.e., organic and/or eco-friendly products). Nevertheless, only 29% of the youth knew about eco-certifications or other related labeling.

Thus, respondents did not have enough information to differentiate between the misleading statements and sustainable ones.

Awareness of Advertising Regulations

Regulatory frameworks that have been associated with advertising practices in India were found to be least known among the respondents, with only about 24% of them being aware of the guidelines on misleading advertisements. Nevertheless, only a very big majority (89%) of the participants noted the. It requires that the advertisements on environmental issues and their need to be more strongly regulated monitoring.

Qualitative Insights from the Responses

The qualitative aspect of the answers served to give more information about the findings of the research. Over and over again, respondents pointed out that the utilization of terms such as natural or chemical-free is usually utilized by brands as marketing strategies and not real depictions of environmental sustainability. Though influencers were regarded as people to trust and follow the advice when it came to sustainability information, they could become sources of misinformation as well.

Summary Interpretation of Results

In general, the results imply that the Indian youth population is in a complicated situation whereby they are well-informed yet vulnerable consumers. Although they have high levels of when exposed to sustainable messages, it has been shown that they do not have the critical skills to evaluate any claims related to greening. There is a high impact of digital marketing campaigns, particularly those by influencers, an important influence in determining attitudes and perceptions, which in some cases may make it difficult to distinguish information from persuasion. There is an attitude-behavior gap, which is combined with poor breeding ground of sustainability literacy and knowledge about the regulations greenwashing.

DISCUSSION

The findings made on the basis of this research contribute to the existing body of knowledge of the attitudes of young people in India towards greenwashing in online advertising. They also contribute to the theory and practice in this realm. The major revelation is that there is a high degree of awareness, yet low degree of critical understanding of greenwashing. While more than half of the respondents claimed to be aware of it, only some of these showed their understanding to discern misleading information about environmental performance.

The fact that advertising is prevalent on the social channels that revolve around sustainability issues is not out of place according to predictions of the Agenda-Setting Theory. Thus, in popular culture, environmental issues are constantly referred to through social media. Nonetheless, the power of advertisements does not lead to the formation of a critical attitude towards advertisements since the consumers do not develop a critical attitude towards the messages within their framework. In this regard, the application of cultural frames like (natural), (organic) or (Ayurvedic) could be considered successful with respect to the Framing Theory.

Moreover, the results confirm the Theory of Planned Behavior in specific to be used to explain the attitude-behavior paradox. Although the consumers who were surveyed has a positive attitude towards sustainable products, their buying decision was influenced by other factors like price, convenience and familiarity of the brand. This suggests that consumer behavior is limited by control factors and constraining forces and that is why pro-environmental citizens are not able to practice sustainability in their consumer behavior.

The other perspective of comprehending the role of influencers and digital media is through Uses and Gratifications Theory. In other words, the young use the digital media to fulfil psychological needs such as identity and socialisation. That is, sustainability is regarded as a lifestyle decision and not a moral compulsion. This way, the consumers are able to buy green products without doubting the authenticity of the statement.

Finally, there are instances when the cognitive dissonance theory can be used. A few of the respondents expressed buying green products despite their doubts about the environmental benefits of these products. This implies that the consumers will rationalize their use to feed into their beliefs.

The last, and equally important issue of the study is that there is a low literacy and awareness of sustainability and regulations among Indian youth. Even though the majority of the surveyed were open to strict regulatory frameworks, not a large number of them were aware of the regulations on advertising. In this scenario, it appears that there is a lack of regulation policies in dealing with such an issue.

Based on the above analysis, it is evident that the problem of greenwashing in online advertisements is not absolutely as a result of fraudulent actions by companies, but it is also due to such factors as the consumer psychology and media processes, which also include limited knowledge and awareness. It is in such circumstances that greenwashing occurs, especially in digital media platforms.

These findings are significant in the sense that they will add to the current literature regarding this topic by calling for more than just awareness campaigns.

CONCLUSION

The current study was an endeavor to explore the phenomenon of greenwashing in online advertisements and its effects on the attitudes and awareness of the younger adults in India with regard to environmental sustainability. As the results indicate, although environmental awareness seems to be increasing, the skills to critically analyse the sustainable messages are lacking. This implies that there is an enormous difference in how much the sustainability messages are being perceived and comprehended.

The paper has identified the contribution of the online channels in forming perceptions of environmental responsibility. The influence of social media, influencer marketing campaigns and e-commerce campaigns was substantial as it helped to raise the awareness of the claims of green but it was not enough to guarantee the consumer. As a matter of fact as shown above consumers can read these claims in terms of how they perceive brands, social media influencers and words used.

One of the major lessons learned during the research is an attitude-behaviour gap amongst the Indian youth. Although the respondents had a positive attitude concerning the green products, they had more practical intentions when it came to buying the green products; issues of price, convenience, and availability were the significant influence on their buying intentions. The conclusion is that, when positive economic and information conditions are not present, sustainable consumer action does not reflect an environmental concern.

The other result of the study is the insufficient knowledge of sustainability and regulation. The respondents did not know any eco-labels and advertisement guidelines that would enable them to identify between false claims. However, respondents were in favour of regulations to enhance green advertisements.

On the whole, from this study, it can be inferred that greenwashing in the digital advertising industry is a consequence of more than just the actions of organizations. The issue of greenwashing in online advertisement is caused by the fact that consumers do not have the necessary information about the environmental problems and have a propensity to trust the message in the online advertisement due to the persuasive power of the message in the online ad.

Overall, by paying attention to the population of Indian youth, the present paper contributes to the literature on the issue under discussion.

RECOMMENDATIONS

Based on the identification and conclusions of this study, several recommendations have been outlined to address the issue of greenwashing in digital advertising and enhance the knowledge of sustainability among young Indian people.

First, it is important to enhance sustainability literacy and media literacy of young consumers. The young people can be educated on how to decode the message in the advertising on sustainability and adopt the right patterns of consumption.

Secondly, there is a need to enhance transparency in respect to digital advertising practices. Marketers and companies must clearly indicate what their adverts are all about and ensure that the claims regarding the environment do not contradict each other and are backed by some facts. The employment of buzzwords, such as, natural, environmentally friendly, no chemicals, etc., should be restricted and explained. Meanwhile, influencers in the social media should transparently declare any paid collaboration and sponsorship.

Lastly, there is an urgent need to regulate and enforce the available laws pertaining to misleading advertisement. As an example, ASCI can better supervise the actions of companies to make sure that advertisements do not deceive customers and give them a clear information about their products and services.

Also, efforts should be made to sensitize the people to the current laws and certification programs in relation to environmental protection. The campaigns held by government institutions or non-governmental organizations and held through a variety of online resources may educate the consumer about the legitimate eco-labeling and certifications.

Ethical conduct of businesses in the marketing communication process is also an important aspect in combating greenwashing. Firms should not be involved in such an activity as greenwashing and use simple and clear language when they communicate their environmental successes to their stakeholders.

Lastly, new studies should be conducted in order to determine other focus areas of digital advertisement that need special consideration. Such aspects as the impact of personalization algorithms, various attitudes of consumers towards the sustainability issue in the various geographic areas, and the role of influencer marketing in the sustainability awareness should be discussed.

To sum up, greenwashing is an issue that educators, regulators, marketers, as well as consumers, should fight. Some of the steps that can bring about overcoming greenwashing in digital marketing include improving consumer awareness, improving the existing mechanisms of regulation and promoting transparency.

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Appendix A: Questionnaire

Greenwashing in Digital Advertising: Consumer Perception and Sustainability Awareness among Indian Youth

Section A: Demographic Information

Q1. Age Group

☐ 18–21 ☐ 22–25 ☐ 26–30

Q2. Gender

☐ Male ☐ Female ☐ Prefer not to say ☐ Other

Q3. Education Level

☐ Undergraduate ☐ Postgraduate ☐ Other

Q4. Occupation

☐ Student ☐ Employed ☐ Self-employed ☐ Other

Section B: Digital Media Usage

Q5. Frequency of digital media usage

☐ Daily ☐ Several times a day ☐ Occasionally ☐ Rarely

Q6. Platforms used (Select all that apply)

☐ Instagram ☐ YouTube ☐ Facebook ☐ E-commerce apps ☐ Other

Q7. Exposure to sustainability-related advertisements

☐ Very often ☐ Often ☐ Sometimes ☐ Rarely ☐ Never

Section C: Awareness of Greenwashing

Q8. Have you heard of the term “greenwashing”?

☐ Yes ☐ No

Q9. Level of understanding (if yes)

☐ Very high ☐ High ☐ Moderate ☐ Low

Q10. Companies exaggerate environmental claims in advertisements

☐ Strongly Agree ☐ Agree ☐ Neutral ☐ Disagree ☐ Strongly Disagree

Section D: Perception of Digital Advertising

(Tick one option for each statement: 1 = Strongly Disagree, 5 = Strongly Agree)

Statement	1	2	3	4	5
Q11. I trust sustainability claims in digital ads	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
Q12. Influencers promote genuinely eco-friendly products	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
Q13. I find it difficult to verify environmental claims online	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
Q14. Green ads influence my purchase decisions	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
Q15. Companies are honest about sustainability	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
Q16. Some eco-friendly claims are misleading	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐

Section E: Consumer Behaviour

Q17. Purchased product due to eco-friendly marketing

☐ Yes ☐ No

Q18. Checking authenticity before purchase

☐ Always ☐ Often ☐ Sometimes ☐ Rarely ☐ Never

Q19. Main factor influencing trust

☐ Brand reputation ☐ Certifications ☐ Influencers ☐ Ads ☐ Reviews

Section F: Influencer & Personalized Advertising

Q20. Follow eco-friendly influencers

☐ Yes ☐ No

Q21. Influencer recommendations increase trust

☐ Strongly Agree ☐ Agree ☐ Neutral ☐ Disagree ☐ Strongly Disagree

Q22. Seen personalized sustainability ads

☐ Yes ☐ No ☐ Not sure

Q23. Personalized ads make products more appealing

☐ Strongly Agree ☐ Agree ☐ Neutral ☐ Disagree ☐ Strongly Disagree

Section G: Regulatory Awareness

Q24. Awareness of advertising regulations in India

☐ Yes ☐ No

Q25. Need for stricter regulations

☐ Strongly Agree ☐ Agree ☐ Neutral ☐ Disagree ☐ Strongly Disagree

Section H: Open-Ended Questions

Q26. How can consumers identify greenwashing?

Q27. Suggestions to improve transparency in sustainability advertising
