

Greenwashing in Marketing: Its Impact on Consumer Trust and Sustainable Buying Behaviour

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Abstract - Greenwashing has become a major concern in modern marketing as many companies promote their products as “eco-friendly” or “sustainable” without actually following genuine environmental practices. This study examines the concept of greenwashing and its impact on consumer trust and sustainable buying behaviour. The research highlights how businesses use misleading environmental claims to improve brand image, attract customers, and increase sales. The study also explores consumer awareness regarding greenwashing and how people react when they discover false sustainability claims made by companies. The findings reveal that environmental claims strongly influence consumer purchasing decisions, but repeated cases of greenwashing have made consumers more cautious and skeptical. Many consumers no longer fully trust green advertisements and prefer companies that provide honest and transparent information about their environmental practices. The study further shows that greenwashing negatively affects brand reputation and reduces long-term consumer trust. Social media also plays an important role in exposing misleading environmental marketing practices and spreading awareness among consumers. The research concludes that businesses should focus on genuine sustainability efforts instead of deceptive marketing strategies. Ethical marketing, transparency, and responsible environmental practices are essential for building consumer confidence and maintaining long-term customer relationships in today’s competitive market.

Keywords: Greenwashing, Consumer Trust, Sustainable Buying Behaviour, Green Marketing, Environmental Claims, Ethical Marketing

1. INTRODUCTION

Environmental sustainability has become one of the most important concerns in today’s world. People are now more aware of environmental problems such as climate change, pollution, deforestation, global warming, and plastic waste. Due to this growing awareness, consumers

are becoming more conscious about the products they purchase and the impact those products have on the environment. Many consumers now prefer products that are labelled as “eco-friendly,” “organic,” “biodegradable” and “sustainable” because they believe such products are safer for the environment and society. This shift in consumer thinking has encouraged companies to adopt green marketing practices to attract environmentally conscious customers (Peattie & Crane, 2005).

Green marketing refers to promoting products and services by highlighting their environmental benefits. Companies use sustainability-related advertisements and environmental claims to improve their image and gain consumer attention. Businesses have realised that consumers are more likely to support brands that appear socially and environmentally responsible. As a result, many companies have started focusing on environmentally friendly branding and packaging to create a positive impression in the market.

However, not all companies genuinely follow sustainable practices. Some businesses make false or exaggerated environmental claims only to increase profits and improve their brand image. This misleading practice is known as greenwashing. According to Delmas and Burbano (2011), greenwashing occurs when companies mislead consumers about their environmental practices or the environmental benefits of their products. In simple words, companies try to appear environmentally responsible without making real efforts to protect the environment.

Greenwashing has become common in industries such as fashion, cosmetics, food products, tourism, and consumer goods. Companies often use green packaging, pictures of nature, and vague words like “natural” or “green” to attract consumers, even when their products may not actually be environmentally friendly. For example, some fast-fashion brands advertise sustainable clothing collections while continuing production methods that cause environmental damage. Similarly, certain plastic products are promoted as eco-friendly despite contributing heavily to pollution.

The increasing use of greenwashing has created confusion among consumers. Many people now find it difficult to identify which products are genuinely sustainable and which are marketed falsely as environmentally friendly. Chen and Chang (2013) stated that greenwashing reduces consumer trust and increases skepticism toward green advertisements. When consumers discover misleading environmental claims, they often lose confidence not only in a particular company but also in environmental marketing in general. Social media and digital platforms have also increased awareness regarding greenwashing practices. Consumers can now easily share information, reviews, and opinions online, which helps to expose companies involved in misleading environmental communication. Businesses that engage in greenwashing often face public criticism and damage to their reputation because consumers expect honesty and transparency from companies today (Lyon & Montgomery, 2015).

This study focuses on understanding the concept of greenwashing and examining its impact on consumer trust and sustainable buying behaviour. The research aims to analyse why companies engage in greenwashing, how consumers react to misleading environmental claims, and why ethical and transparent marketing practices are important for long-term business success.

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

Green marketing has gained significant importance in recent years because consumers are becoming more aware of environmental issues and sustainable living. Businesses have started promoting products and services by focusing on their environmental benefits in order to attract environmentally conscious consumers. According to Peattie and Crane (2005), green marketing became popular as consumers increasingly demanded products that were safer for the environment. Companies realised that environmental responsibility could improve brand image, attract customers, and create a competitive advantage in the market.

Although green marketing was introduced to encourage sustainability, many companies began misusing environmental claims for commercial benefits. Delmas and Burbano (2011) explained that greenwashing occurs when companies mislead consumers about their environmental practices or exaggerate the environmental benefits of their products. Instead of making real environmental improvements, some businesses spend

more money on advertising themselves as environmentally responsible. This creates a false image of sustainability and misleads consumers.

Research studies have identified different forms of greenwashing used by companies. TerraChoice Environmental Marketing (2010) identified practices such as vague claims, false labels, hidden trade-offs, and misleading advertisements as common forms of greenwashing. Many companies use terms like “natural,” “green,” or “eco-friendly” without providing proper proof or certifications. In many cases, environmental claims are designed mainly to influence consumer emotions rather than provide accurate information.

Consumer trust has become one of the most affected areas due to greenwashing practices. Chen and Chang (2013) found that misleading environmental claims reduce consumer trust and create confusion regarding sustainable products. When consumers discover that a company has exaggerated or falsely promoted its environmental efforts, they often become skeptical about all green advertisements. This skepticism not only damages the reputation of dishonest companies but also affects genuinely sustainable businesses that follow ethical practices.

Greenwashing is also considered an unethical marketing practice because it deceives consumers who genuinely want to support environmentally responsible businesses. Nyilasy, Gangadharbatla, and Paladino (2014) stated that greenwashing negatively affects consumer perceptions and weakens the credibility of environmental marketing. Consumers may feel cheated when companies use sustainability only as a marketing strategy instead of fulfilling real social and environmental responsibilities.

The rise of social media has further increased public awareness regarding greenwashing practices. Lyon and Montgomery (2015) explained that digital platforms allow consumers to quickly share information, reviews, and opinions regarding company practices. As a result, businesses involved in misleading environmental communication can face public criticism and damage to their reputation within a short period. Social media has therefore increased consumer awareness and corporate accountability.

The existing literature clearly shows that while green marketing can encourage sustainable buying behaviour and environmental awareness, greenwashing creates distrust, confusion, and skepticism among consumers. Previous studies highlight the importance of honesty, transparency, and ethical marketing practices in building long-term consumer trust and maintaining a positive brand image.

OBJECTIVES OF THE STUDY

- To understand the concept of greenwashing in marketing.
- To identify the major reasons why companies use greenwashing practices.
- To examine the impact of greenwashing on consumer trust.
- To analyse the effect of greenwashing on sustainable buying behaviour of consumers.
- To suggest ways through which companies can adopt honest and ethical marketing practices.

SCOPE OF THE STUDY

This study mainly focuses on the concept of greenwashing and its impact on consumer trust and sustainable buying behaviour. The research examines how companies use misleading environmental claims in marketing to attract consumers and improve their brand image. It studies consumer awareness and perceptions regarding eco-friendly advertisements and sustainability-related marketing practices.

The study covers industries where environmental claims are commonly used, such as fashion, cosmetics, food products, tourism, and consumer goods. It also analyses how greenwashing influences consumer purchasing decisions, trust, and loyalty toward brands. In addition, the study highlights the role of social media and digital platforms in spreading awareness about misleading environmental practices.

The research is limited to understanding consumer opinions, attitudes, and behaviour regarding green marketing and greenwashing practices. The study also focuses on the importance of ethical marketing, transparency, and genuine sustainability practices for

building long-term consumer trust and responsible business growth.

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

Research methodology refers to the systematic process used to collect, analyse, and interpret information for conducting research. It helps the researcher understand the problem in a scientific and organised manner. The present study focuses on understanding the concept of greenwashing and examining its impact on consumer trust and sustainable buying behaviour. The methodology adopted for this study is explained below in detail.

Research Design

The study is based on a descriptive research design. Descriptive research is used to describe the behaviour, opinions, attitudes, and perceptions of consumers regarding a particular issue. In this study, descriptive research helps in understanding consumer awareness about greenwashing, their trust in environmental claims, and the influence of green marketing on their buying behaviour. The design was selected because it allows the researcher to collect detailed information about consumer perceptions and reactions toward misleading environmental advertising.

Nature of the Study

The study is both analytical and explanatory in nature. It not only explains the concept of greenwashing but also analyses its effects on consumer trust and purchasing decisions. The research aims to understand why companies engage in greenwashing practices and how consumers respond to false or exaggerated environmental claims.

Sources of Data

The study is based on both primary and secondary sources of data.

Primary Data

Primary data refers to first-hand information collected directly from respondents for a specific research purpose. In this study, primary data was collected through a structured questionnaire distributed among

consumers. The questionnaire included questions related to:

- Awareness about environmental issues and greenwashing
- Trust in eco-friendly products and advertisements
- Influence of environmental claims on buying decisions
- Consumer reactions toward misleading environmental claims
- Willingness to support genuinely sustainable brands

The use of questionnaires helped in collecting direct opinions and perceptions from consumers regarding greenwashing practices.

Secondary Data

Secondary data refers to information that has already been collected and published by other researchers, organisations, or institutions. For the present study, secondary data was collected from:

- Research journals
- Books and articles
- Websites and online reports
- Sustainability reports
- Published research papers on green marketing and greenwashing

Secondary data helped in developing theoretical understanding and supporting the findings of the study with existing literature.

Sampling Method

The study used the convenience sampling method for selecting respondents. Convenience sampling is a non-probability sampling technique in which respondents are selected based on their availability and willingness to participate in the study. This method was chosen because it is simple, economical, and suitable for collecting responses within a limited time period.

Sample Size

The study was conducted on a sample of 150 consumers. Respondents from different age groups, occupations, and educational backgrounds were included in the

research to understand diverse consumer opinions regarding greenwashing and sustainable buying behaviour.

Area of the Study

The study focuses on consumers who are aware of environmental issues and purchase products promoted through green marketing strategies. The research mainly covers industries where environmental claims are commonly used, such as fashion, cosmetics, food products, and consumer goods.

Data Collection Instrument

A structured questionnaire was used as the main tool for collecting primary data. The questionnaire contained both close-ended and opinion-based questions. Simple and clear language was used to ensure that respondents could easily understand and answer the questions. The questionnaire was divided into different sections such as:

1. Personal information of respondents
2. Awareness regarding greenwashing
3. Consumer perception toward environmental claims
4. Impact of greenwashing on trust and buying behaviour
5. Suggestions regarding ethical marketing practices

Data Analysis and Interpretation

The collected data was organised, classified, and analysed systematically. Responses from participants were interpreted using percentages and descriptive analysis. The findings were presented in a simple manner to understand consumer opinions regarding greenwashing and sustainable marketing practices.

The analysis focused on:

- Level of consumer awareness about greenwashing
- Degree of trust in eco-friendly products
- Influence of environmental claims on purchasing decisions
- Consumer skepticism toward green marketing
- Impact of misleading advertisements on brand loyalty

Limitations of the Study

Although the study provides useful insights regarding greenwashing and consumer behaviour, certain limitations are present:

- The study is limited to a sample size of 150 respondents only.
- Convenience sampling may not fully represent the entire population.
- Responses are based on personal opinions and perceptions of consumers.
- The study mainly focuses on selected industries and may not cover all sectors using green marketing practices.
- Time and resource limitations restricted wider data collection.

Data Analysis and Findings

The collected data was analysed to understand consumer awareness regarding greenwashing and its impact on trust and sustainable buying behaviour. Responses gathered from 150 consumers were interpreted using descriptive analysis and percentage-based interpretation. The findings of the study are discussed below.

1. Awareness about Greenwashing

The study revealed that a majority of respondents were aware of the concept of greenwashing. Around 68% of participants stated that they clearly understood misleading environmental claims made by companies, while 22% had partial knowledge of the concept. Only 10% of respondents were completely unaware of greenwashing practices.

This finding indicates that consumers are becoming more informed about environmental marketing practices due to increasing awareness campaigns, social media discussions, and online information related to sustainability. Consumers today are more conscious about how companies use environmental claims to influence purchasing decisions. Increased awareness has made people more likely to question the authenticity of eco-friendly advertisements and demand transparency from businesses.

2. Influence of Environmental Claims on Buying Behaviour

The analysis showed that environmental claims significantly influence consumer buying decisions. Approximately 55% of respondents stated that they are highly influenced by eco-friendly or sustainable labels while purchasing products. Around 30% reported that such claims moderately influence their buying behaviour, whereas only 15% stated that environmental claims do not affect their purchasing decisions.

This finding reflects the growing concern among consumers regarding environmental sustainability. Modern consumers prefer products that appear environmentally safe because they believe their buying decisions can positively contribute to society and environmental protection. Businesses are aware of this trend, which explains the increasing use of green marketing strategies in different industries.

3. Consumer Trust in Eco-Friendly Products

The study found that consumers do not completely trust all products labelled as “green” or “eco-friendly.” Many respondents stated that they trust environmental claims only sometimes because they are uncertain whether the claims are genuine or simply marketing tactics. A smaller percentage of respondents reported that they always trust eco-friendly labels, while several participants admitted that they rarely trust such advertisements.

This finding highlights the growing caution among consumers regarding sustainability-related marketing. Due to repeated cases of misleading environmental advertising, people have become more careful before believing green claims. Consumers now expect companies to provide proper proof, certifications, and transparent information regarding their environmental practices before making purchasing decisions.

4. Consumer Reaction after Discovering Greenwashing

One of the major findings of the study is that greenwashing has a strong negative impact on consumer trust. Around 72% of respondents stated that their trust in a company decreases significantly after discovering false or exaggerated environmental claims. About 18% reported a slight decrease in trust, while only a very

small percentage believed that greenwashing does not affect their opinion about a company.

This result shows that deceptive environmental marketing damages brand reputation and customer relationships. Consumers feel cheated when companies pretend to care about sustainability only to increase profits. Once consumer trust is broken, customers become less likely to remain loyal to the brand and may even spread negative opinion regarding the company to others.

5. Consumer Skepticism towards Green Marketing

The research also found that repeated exposure to misleading environmental advertisements increases consumer skepticism. Many respondents stated that they now question most sustainability-related advertisements because they believe companies often exaggerate environmental benefits for promotional purposes.

This finding suggests that greenwashing not only harms dishonest businesses but also negatively affects genuinely sustainable companies. When consumers stop trusting environmental claims, ethical businesses may also struggle to convince consumers about their real sustainability efforts. Therefore, greenwashing damages the overall credibility of green marketing practices.

6. Industries Most Associated with Greenwashing

According to the responses collected, consumers believe that greenwashing is most common in the fashion industry. Many participants stated that fast-fashion brands frequently advertise “sustainable collections” while continuing environmentally harmful production practices. Cosmetics, food products, and consumer goods industries were also commonly associated with misleading environmental claims.

This finding suggests that industries heavily dependent on branding and advertising are more likely to use green marketing techniques to influence consumer perceptions. Companies in these industries often use attractive packaging, green colours, and nature-related images to create an environmentally responsible image.

7. Role of Social Media in Consumer Awareness

The study highlighted that social media plays a major role in spreading awareness regarding greenwashing

practices. Many respondents stated that they learned about misleading environmental advertising through platforms such as Instagram, YouTube, Twitter, and online news sources.

Social media enables consumers to quickly share reviews, opinions, and information about company practices. As a result, businesses involved in greenwashing can face public criticism and reputational damage within a short period of time. This finding demonstrates that digital platforms have increased consumer awareness and strengthened corporate accountability.

8. Willingness to Support Genuine Sustainable Brands

The research found that most consumers are willing to support companies that genuinely follow sustainable practices. Many respondents stated that they are ready to pay slightly higher prices for products that are truly eco-friendly and ethically produced.

This finding indicates that consumers value honesty, transparency, and ethical behaviour from companies. Businesses that adopt genuine sustainability practices are more likely to build long-term customer trust, loyalty, and positive brand image. Ethical marketing therefore benefits both society and businesses in the long run.

Overall Findings of the Study

The overall analysis clearly shows that greenwashing has a negative impact on consumer trust and sustainable buying behaviour. Consumers today are more informed, aware, and socially conscious than before. Although environmental claims strongly influence purchasing decisions, misleading sustainability communication damages trust and increases skepticism toward green marketing practices.

The study also reveals that consumers prefer businesses that follow genuine environmental practices rather than companies that use false sustainability claims for promotional purposes. Social media has further increased consumer awareness and has made it easier to expose unethical marketing practices.

The findings suggest that companies should focus on real sustainability efforts, honest communication, and transparent environmental practices instead of relying on

deceptive advertising strategies. Ethical marketing is essential for maintaining long-term consumer trust and creating a positive brand reputation in the modern business environment.

RECOMMENDATIONS

Based on the findings of the study, several recommendations can be suggested to reduce greenwashing practices and improve consumer trust in sustainable marketing.

1. Companies Should Provide Honest and Transparent Information

Businesses should ensure that all environmental claims made in advertisements, packaging and promotional campaigns are truthful, clear, and supported by evidence. Consumers today expect transparency regarding sustainability practices, and misleading claims can damage brand reputation and trust. According to Chen and Chang (2013), honest environmental communication helps in building green trust and reducing consumer confusion. Therefore, companies should avoid vague terms such as “natural” or “eco-friendly” unless proper proof and certifications are available.

2. Focus on Genuine Sustainability Practices

Companies should invest in real environmental improvements instead of spending heavily on misleading green advertising. Businesses must adopt sustainable production methods, reduce waste, minimise pollution, and use environmentally friendly materials in their operations. Delmas and Burbano (2011) stated that companies engaging in genuine sustainability practices are more likely to gain long-term consumer trust and positive public image. Genuine environmental responsibility should become part of the company's core business strategy rather than only a marketing tool.

3. Use Certified Environmental Labels and Standards

Businesses should use recognised environmental certifications and eco-labels to support their sustainability claims. Third-party certifications help consumers identify genuinely sustainable products and reduce confusion regarding environmental

advertisements. Proper certifications also increase consumer confidence because they provide evidence that the product follows environmental standards and ethical practices.

4. Governments Should Introduce Stricter Regulations

Government authorities and regulatory bodies should create stricter laws and guidelines to control false environmental advertising. Companies making misleading sustainability claims should face penalties and legal action to discourage unethical marketing practices. TerraChoice Environmental Marketing (2010) highlighted that weak regulations often encourage companies to use vague and deceptive environmental claims. Strong regulatory systems can therefore help in protecting consumers from misinformation and improving market transparency.

5. Increase Consumer Awareness and Education

Consumers should be educated about greenwashing and sustainable consumption through awareness campaigns, educational programs, and social media platforms. Informed consumers are more likely to question misleading advertisements and verify environmental claims before making purchases. Increased awareness can also encourage businesses to behave more responsibly because consumers today can easily expose unethical practices online.

6. Encourage Ethical Marketing Practices

Companies should adopt ethical marketing practices based on honesty, transparency, and social responsibility. Ethical marketing not only improves brand reputation but also helps in building long-term customer relationships. Nyilasy, Gangadharbatla, and Paladino (2014) explained that deceptive environmental communication negatively affects both businesses and society. Therefore, businesses must ensure that sustainability-related communication reflects actual environmental performance.

7. Effective Use of Social Media for Transparency

Businesses should use social media platforms to openly communicate their environmental initiatives, sustainability goals, and progress reports. Social media can help companies engage directly with consumers and build trust through transparent communication. Lyon

and Montgomery (2015) noted that digital platforms have increased corporate accountability because consumers can quickly share information regarding misleading environmental practices. Transparent online communication can therefore strengthen consumer confidence and improve brand credibility.

8. Promote Long-Term Sustainable Business Strategies

Companies should understand that sustainability is not only beneficial for marketing but also important for long-term business growth and social responsibility. Businesses that genuinely care about environmental protection are more likely to attract loyal customers, improve their reputation, and achieve sustainable competitive advantage in the market. Long-term sustainability efforts can create positive outcomes for both businesses and society.

3. CONCLUSION

Greenwashing has become a serious issue in modern marketing because many companies use false or exaggerated environmental claims to attract consumers and improve their brand image. As people become more environmentally conscious, businesses increasingly promote products as “green,” “eco-friendly,” or “sustainable.” However, when companies fail to support these claims with genuine environmental practices, consumer trust is negatively affected. The study revealed that consumers today are more aware of greenwashing and often become skeptical about environmental advertisements after discovering misleading claims. According to Chen and Chang (2013), greenwashing creates confusion among consumers and reduces trust in green marketing practices. This not only harms dishonest companies but also affects businesses that genuinely follow sustainable and ethical practices.

The study also highlights that honesty, transparency, and ethical marketing are essential for building long-term consumer trust and positive brand reputation. Consumers are willing to support and even pay more for products that are genuinely environmentally friendly and socially responsible. Social media and digital platforms have further increased consumer awareness and corporate accountability by exposing misleading environmental practices quickly (Lyon & Montgomery, 2015). Therefore, companies should focus on real sustainability efforts instead of using sustainability only

as a promotional strategy. Genuine environmental responsibility and transparent communication can help businesses build stronger relationships with consumers and achieve long-term success in the competitive market.

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