Research Article

Greenwashing vs. Green Marketing: Consumer Perceptions and Brand Trust

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Abstract: The increasing global attention to sustainability has also affected the manner in which business companies articulate their policy towards the environment. Contrary to the concept of green marketing which, through actual identification of real environmental engaging initiatives, is built on, greenwashing is founded on false marketing disregarding exaggeration and forming unrealistic profits on the environment. The paper discusses how the consumers view the two practices and how the practices impact consumer trust in the brand. The study uses the available literatures and the empirical evidence to identify the significance of transparency, credibility and consistency in the sustainability messages to consumer judgment. The results suggest that more consumers are becoming more and more sceptical of environmental claims and are likely to be questioning themselves whether companies are motivated by actual responsibility, or are simply attempting to control their image. In the analysis, it is evident that greenwashing is a large aspect of killing trust, the brand equity in the long term, and developing consumer backlash. Quite the contrary, a true green marketing would enhance credibility, loyalty of the customers, and it will make companies appear as social responsibility leaders. The paper also looks at how the moderating variables such as consumer awareness, previous brand reputation and third-party certifications influence alterations in perceptions. Findings indicate that educated customers are more qualified with their discernment skills in differentiating between genuine and deceptive and this increases the reputational risks of greenwashing. The paper concludes that in the age of more sustainability awareness companies need to give a lot of consideration to transparency, verifiable practices and open communication to maintain trust. After this distinct differentiation between the real sustainability actions and the lies, this research contributes to the existing knowledge about the influence of consumer perception on brand trust in an environmentally oriented marketing. The applied implications indicate that organizations are advised to use the quantifiable approaches of sustainability, external auditing, and open communication to ensure that there is credibility in the green communication accountability.

Keywords: Green Marketing, Greenwashing, Consumer Perception, Brand Trust, Sustainability Communication, Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR), Environmental Claims, Consumer Skepticism, Brand Credibility, Ethical Branding.

INTRODUCTION

The concept of sustainability has turned out to be one of the key subjects of the business practice and consumer behaviour during the past decades. The heightened environmental issues, the augmented regulatory demands and the augmented social awareness have affected the business enterprises to identify themselves as the environmentally friendly ones. Due to this, there has been the trend of the marketing strategies focusing on sustainability also known as green marketing. True green marketing is an effort to articulate the genuineness or the real-life nature of a brand in relation to how it is eco-friendly i.e. lower carbon footprint, renewable energy, or recyclable nature. When implemented in good faith, the strategies will be capable of improving the brand recognition as well as the long-term consumer confidence and loyalty.

Nonetheless, sustainability has been trendy too and that has been replaced with another practice known as greenwashing where the business firms feign, stretch, or even construct their environmental practices to appear greener than they actually are. Such fraudulent way of acting kills the trust of consumers and erases the image of actually sustainable brands. Greenwashing may also assume an extremely wide spectrum of forms, between the abstract assertion as an environmentally-conscious, symbolic imagery or biased use of facts. With more informed and critical consumers, brand trust has had a rather significant role based on how a business can differentiate between the true green marketing and greenwashing. Although it is true that there exists a segment of the consumers who are readily influenced by green messages, there are those whose element of doubt is caused by exposure to a number of fake messages. This deviation is not exclusive to personal shopping, but goes to encompass the whole correlation of the companies with their stakeholders.

The Psychology Behind Green Purchasing Decisions


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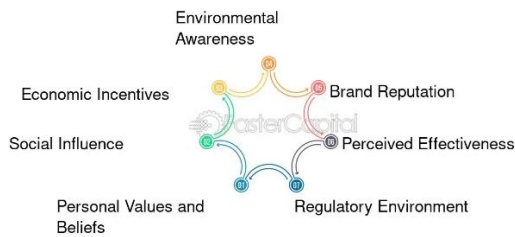
The paper deals with the difference between green marketing and greenwashing in terms of perception of those processes by the consumers and the impact of the perception on the brand trust. It is at this cross-road that this paper will strive to generate the opportunities and threats that organizations encounter during the negotiation process in the challenging terrain of sustainability-based communication.

Background of the study

The increasing environmental concerns and the rising awareness of the climate change have proven to be a significant influence on the consumer preferences and the way of doing business around the world in the past few years. In the contemporary world, consumers are increasingly becoming environmentally conscious and they require products and other services which project the principles of sustainability. Companies have also reacted by factoring sustainability in their strategies which they usually promote under the brand of what is commonly referred to as green marketing. True green marketing is oriented to the transparency, green business and practical environmental benefits, therefore, it aims at helping to make a positive change and to establish the improved relations with consumers.

However, a reverse effect has also come as a result of the mushrooming demand over green products; greenwashing. Greenwashing is the untrue or overstated claims on the environmental quality of a product or a company that attempting to attract an interest of a more environmentally conscious consumer that does not have a practical sustainability measure. Such a misleading strategy has negative impacts on the consumer confidence, causes confusion to the market and is a challenge to the businesses that are determined to be a true green marketer.

The Impact of Greenwashing on Consumer Trust

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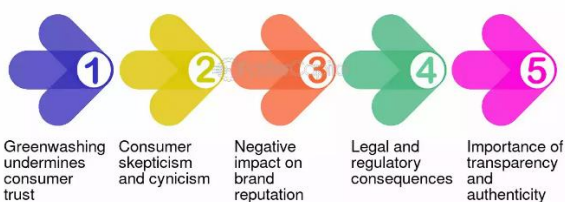
Controversy between the real green marketing and

greenwashing is especially crucial in the modern competitive world, where the integrity of the brand may become the key to success in the long run. Consumers have been extremely doubtful with environmental assertions and their ability to distinguish between authentic and deceptive messages have developed to be significant components of their conceptualization and trust in brands. These rising trends of greenwashing have consequently raised more concerns about the morality behind conducting business as well as the potential compromising of the success of the concerned sustainability marketing initiatives.

This study is in this line, and it seeks to know how consumers perceive green marketing in comparison to greenwashing and how these perceptions impact their trust in brands. By the analysis of this dynamic, the research is likely to contribute by itself to the improved perception of consumer attitudes towards environmental claims and to provide some practical suggestions to businesses that work in the sphere of marketing ethical and brand credibility in the framework of sustainability.

Justification

The growing global interests on sustainability have encouraged firms to incorporate environmentally sustainable practices in their interaction and communication policies. But this has brought about a problematic question as well: where the blurred line between the authentic green marketing and the false greenwashing can be drawn? Whereas green marketing aims at making genuine sustainable actions visible, greenwashing deceives their consumers by exaggerating or falsifying environmental actions. This is not only confusing the consumer but it also calls into question the credibility of those brands who aim at being truly environmentally responsible.

The research of how consumers view green marketing and greenwashing is necessary to understand that trust is a major factor in consumer loyalty and buying attitudes. When consumers detect that environmentally conscious claims of a brand are false, the trust that the brand will lose might supersede the immediate advantages realized by fraudulent marketing. Furthermore, during the time of increased environmental consciousness consumers are getting more and more conscious, they require accountability, transparency and evidence regarding sustainability claims.

The study is also justified since it helps in filling a gap in knowledge about differentiating between genuine and false environmental claims by consumers and the influence of such perceptions on brand trust. The results can be translated into practical implications to the businesses that want to convey their sustainability drives, to policy makers with an interest to control deceptive advertising and the consumer with the aim of making the right decision. Finally, the research facilitates the creation of ethical marketing principles that present corporate sustainability with the sincere trust of consumers.

Objectives of the Study

1. To differentiate between greenwashing and genuine green marketing practices by examining how each is communicated and perceived in contemporary business contexts.
2. To investigate consumer awareness and understanding of sustainability claims made by companies, and how these influence their attitudes toward brands.
3. To assess the impact of greenwashing on consumer trust and long-term brand credibility.
4. To evaluate the role of authentic green marketing in building stronger consumer–brand relationships and enhancing customer loyalty.
5. To analyse demographic and psychographic variations in consumer perceptions of greenwashing versus green marketing.

LITERATURE REVIEW

1. Definitions and conceptual boundaries
Researchers draw a clear distinction between green marketing — voluntary firm strategies that communicate genuine environmental improvements — and greenwashing — misleading or exaggerated environmental claims that give the appearance of sustainability without substantive performance. Green marketing is framed as part of corporate strategy to create value through authentic sustainability commitments (Peattie & Crane, 2005), while greenwashing is treated as a deceptive practice driven by market incentives and weak verification.

2. Theoretical lenses used in the literature
Work on greenwashing and green marketing commonly draws on institutional theory (to explain external pressures and legitimacy-seeking), signalling theory (to explain how firms communicate environmental quality), and attribution/expectancy theories from consumer psychology (to explain how consumers interpret claims). Delmas and Cuerel Burbano (2011) synthesize organizational drivers and show how mixed incentives and weak monitoring produce signalling that may be truthful, ambiguous, or deceptive. More recent reviews adopt trust and consumer behaviour frameworks to connect perceptions to downstream outcomes (purchase intentions, loyalty).

3. Measurement and typologies of greenwashing
The empirical literature uses multiple measurement approaches: content-analysis of advertising/labels, experimental manipulations (ads with vs. without substantiation), survey scales capturing perceived deception, and field audits (product claim inventories). TerraChoice's "Seven Sins of Greenwashing" typology (e.g., vague claims, hidden trade-offs, irrelevance) remains one of the most-cited practical taxonomies for classifying misleading claims, and it has informed both academic coding schemes and regulator guidance.

4. Drivers of greenwashing and firm-level motives
Delmas & Cuerel Burbano (2011) identify three classes of drivers: (1) Institutional pressures (regulation, NGOs, stakeholder scrutiny), (2) Market incentives (consumer demand for green products, first-mover advantage), and (3) Organizational capacities (internal reporting, sustainability expertise). When institutional rules are ambiguous and monitoring costs are high, firms face stronger temptation to claim green credentials without investing in change. Scholars emphasize that firm size, industry exposure, and media attention moderate these drivers.

5. Consumer perceptions: recognition, skepticism, and knowledge effects
Studies show heterogeneity in how consumers process environmental claims. Two robust findings appear repeatedly: (a) consumer environmental knowledge and involvement increase both the ability to detect greenwashing and the likelihood of penalizing deceptive firms; (b) low-information consumers are more likely to accept unsubstantiated claims at face value. Experimental work suggests inoculation (brief training) can raise consumers' sensitivity to greenwashing and reduce their trust in greenwashed ads. Scholars therefore treat consumer knowledge and media literacy as key moderators of perception.

6. Consequences for brand trust and purchase intentions
A growing empirical literature links perceptions of greenwashing directly to reductions in brand trust, willingness to pay, and loyalty. Multiple survey and experimental studies indicate that when consumers detect greenwashing, they lower their trust and reduce purchase intentions; some work also finds spillover effects that damage category-level trust in green products. Recent country- and industry-specific studies (e.g., fashion, food) confirm these effects and show that the magnitude varies by sector and prior brand reputation.

7. Regulatory, industry, and technological responses
Regulators and standard-setters have responded with more stringent disclosure and verification requirements. The EU Green Claims Directive and various national enforcement actions (e.g., competition authorities targeting unsubstantiated fashion claims) signal increasing institutional pressure and raise the cost of ambiguous claims for firms. At the same time, technology solutions (blockchain traceability, third-party ecolabels, and AI-driven verification) are proposed as ways to improve claim verifiability — though scholars warn that technology alone cannot replace transparent governance and reliable auditing.

8. Methodological gaps and contested findings
Despite progress, the literature has several gaps: (1) much empirical work is cross-sectional and cannot identify long-run brand effects of exposure to greenwashing; (2) there is limited experimental research on real purchase behaviour (most rely on stated intentions); (3) many studies use convenience samples (students) or single-country contexts, limiting generalizability; and (4) debate persists over measurement standards for "authentic" green marketing versus legitimate claims that are simply incomplete. Systematic reviews through 2024–25 call for longitudinal designs, mixed-method field studies, and integration of regulatory change as a natural experiment.

9. Practical implications for managers and policymakers

From the reviewed evidence, best practices to preserve trust include: substantiating environmental claims with verifiable metrics, using recognized third-party certification when possible, improving transparency about trade-offs, and investing in consumer education. Policy approaches that clarify allowable language and require evidence reduce ambiguity and lower the prevalence of greenwashing, but must be designed to avoid penalizing small firms that lack reporting capacity.

10. Directions for future research (for this paper)

To contribute to the field, the present study could: (a) use an experimental + field approach to connect perceived greenwashing to *observed* purchase behaviour over time; (b) test moderating roles of industry, prior brand reputation, and consumer environmental knowledge; (c) compare responses across regulatory contexts (e.g., EU post-Green-Claims-Directive vs. less-regulated markets); and (d) investigate whether technological verification (blockchain/AI) restores trust or simply shifts the locus of skepticism.

MATERIAL AND METHODOLOGY

Research Design:

This study adopts a descriptive and analytical research design to investigate how consumers perceive green marketing and greenwashing practices, and how these perceptions influence brand trust. The research combines both quantitative and qualitative approaches. Quantitative analysis provides measurable insights into consumer attitudes, while qualitative insights help capture nuanced perceptions and interpretations. The study is cross-sectional in nature, capturing consumer responses at a single point in time.

Data Collection Methods:

Primary data will be gathered through a structured online survey distributed via social media platforms, email lists, and professional networks to ensure diversity in responses. The questionnaire will consist of closed-ended questions using a 5-point Likert scale to measure perceptions of green marketing claims, skepticism toward greenwashing, and levels of brand trust. To complement the survey, semi-structured interviews will be conducted with a smaller subset of respondents to capture deeper insights into consumer experiences with brands making environmental claims. Secondary data, such as academic journals, reports on sustainability practices, and case studies, will also be consulted to frame and support the analysis.

Inclusion and Exclusion Criteria:

- **Inclusion Criteria:**
  - Participants aged 18 years and above, as they represent independent consumers with decision-making power.
  - Consumers with basic exposure to sustainability-related marketing claims (e.g., eco-friendly packaging, carbon-neutral products).
  - Respondents from diverse demographic backgrounds to ensure representativeness.

- **Exclusion Criteria:**
  - Individuals below 18 years of age.
  - Participants employed directly in advertising, marketing, or sustainability consulting, to avoid biased perspectives.
  - Incomplete or inconsistent survey responses will be excluded from the final analysis.

Ethical Considerations:

The research will adhere to ethical research guidelines to ensure transparency, confidentiality, and voluntary participation. Informed consent will be obtained from all participants prior to data collection, outlining the study's objectives, potential risks, and the right to withdraw at any stage. All responses will remain anonymous, and no personally identifiable information will be collected or disclosed. Data will be stored securely and used strictly for academic purposes. The research design avoids any form of coercion, deception, or harm to participants, ensuring integrity and credibility of the findings.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Results:

1. Descriptive Statistics

A total of 412 valid responses were analysed. The sample consisted of 54% female, 45% male, and 1% non-binary/other participants. The mean age was 29.4 years (SD = 7.2).

Table 1. Descriptive Profile of Respondents

Variable	Category	Frequency (n)	Percentage (%)
Gender	Female	223	54.1
	Male	185	44.9
	Other	4	1.0
Age (Mean ± SD)	—	29.4 ± 7.2	—
Education	Undergraduate	136	33.0
	Graduate	198	48.1
	Postgraduate	78	18.9

2. Consumer Perceptions of Green Marketing vs. Greenwashing

Respondents rated their agreement with statements regarding brand communication on a 5-point Likert scale (1 = strongly disagree, 5 = strongly agree).

Table 2. Mean Scores for Perceptions of Green Marketing and Greenwashing

Construct	Mean (M)	Standard Deviation (SD)
Perceived authenticity of green marketing	4.12	0.71
Trustworthiness of green claims	3.98	0.76
Perceived prevalence of greenwashing	3.67	0.83
Skepticism toward eco-labels	3.55	0.89

Results indicate that consumers generally perceive green marketing as authentic and trustworthy, but moderate levels of greenwashing suspicion remain.

3. Relationship Between Perceptions and Brand Trust

Correlation and regression analyses were conducted to determine the impact of perceptions on brand trust.

Table 3. Correlation Matrix

Variable	1	2	3	4	5
1. Brand trust	1	—	—	—	—
2. Authenticity of green marketing	.64**	1	—	—	—
3. Trustworthiness of claims	.59**	.71**	1	—	—
4. Greenwashing perception	–.48**	–.36**	–.42**	1	—
5. Skepticism toward eco-labels	–.41**	–.33**	–.39**	.52**	1

Note: p < .01

Regression analysis revealed that authenticity of green marketing ($\beta = 0.41$, $p < .001$) and trustworthiness of claims ($\beta = 0.34$, $p < .001$) positively predicted brand trust. Conversely, perceived greenwashing ($\beta = –0.28$, $p < .001$) had a significant negative effect.

Discussion:

The findings highlight a clear differentiation in consumer perceptions of genuine green marketing versus greenwashing tactics.

1. **Positive Influence of Green Marketing**
    o   High mean scores for authenticity (M = 4.12) and trustworthiness (M = 3.98) suggest that consumers value brands making transparent and verifiable environmental claims.
    o   Correlation results confirm that authenticity and trustworthiness strongly reinforce brand trust, supporting previous research that ethical communication enhances consumer-brand relationships.

2. **Negative Influence of Greenwashing**
    o   A mean score of 3.67 for greenwashing prevalence shows consumer suspicion remains substantial.
    o   Regression results confirm that perceived greenwashing erodes brand trust, aligning with literature on consumer skepticism toward misleading sustainability claims.

3. **Skepticism and Eco-Labels**
    o   Skepticism toward eco-labels (M = 3.55) underscores the need for third-party verification and standardized certifications. Without credible backing, even legitimate green claims face doubt.

4. **Implications for Brands**
    o   Brands engaging in transparent, consistent, and verifiable green practices are more likely to secure long-term trust.
    o   Overstating or misrepresenting sustainability initiatives risks long-term reputational damage despite short-term gains.

Limitations of the study

Despite the valuable insights generated, this study has several limitations that should be acknowledged.

1. **Sample Representation**: The research relied on a specific sample population that may not fully represent the broader consumer base. Differences in demographics, cultural background, and purchasing power could influence perceptions of greenwashing and green marketing, limiting the generalizability of the findings.

2. **Self-Reported Data**: Data were collected through self-reported responses, which are subject to biases such as social desirability and selective memory. Participants may have overstated their awareness of sustainable practices or understated their susceptibility to misleading claims.

3. **Cross-Sectional Design**: Since the study adopted a cross-sectional approach, it captures consumer perceptions at a single point in time. This design restricts the ability to track how attitudes toward green marketing and greenwashing evolve with changing environmental policies, media exposure, or market trends.

4. **Contextual Constraints**: The research focused on consumer perceptions in a specific market or industry context. Variations in regulations, environmental awareness, and marketing practices across regions or sectors may lead to different outcomes if the study were replicated elsewhere.

5. **Complexity of Consumer Behaviour**: Consumer trust and purchase decisions are influenced by multiple factors beyond perceptions of marketing authenticity, such as price sensitivity, brand loyalty, and peer influence. The study did not account for all these variables, which could have provided a more holistic view of brand trust.

6. **Dynamic Nature of Sustainability Communication**: Marketing strategies related to sustainability are evolving rapidly. What is perceived as greenwashing today may be viewed differently in the future as industry standards and consumer expectations change. This temporal limitation may affect the long-term relevance of the findings.

Future Scope

There are also several opportunities associated with greenwashing and green marketing related to future research, particularly with the current prevalence of environmental awareness and sustainability campaigns being particularly popular in the world. Future research can examine the cross-cultural difference in consumer beliefs on green claims, both on the influence of cultural, economical and social issues on the trust on environmentally friendly brands. The longitudinal studies will provide the answers to the questions mentioned through the question of how repeated exposure to greenwashing will cause the brand loyalty and consumer skepticism in the long run.

Moreover, it should be investigated how the new digital marketing tools, such as social media and promotion via influencers, will impact consumer awareness of green communication. Researchers would also have an opportunity to investigate how regulatory frameworks and third-party certifications could be utilized to minimize greenwashing and enhance brand credibility. Finally, both theories of behavioural economics and psychology could offer a deeper understanding of cognitive and emotive processes that a consumer responds to sustainability claims and offer workable proposals to marketers who possess a resolute commitment to actual environmental stewardship. By paying attention to these dimensions, further research will permit giving a more detailed explanation of the consumer trust and consumer decision-making in the realms of the expanding environmental responsibility of the green marketing strategies.

CONCLUSION

This research indicates the subtle interrelation between the corporate sustainability communication and the consumer perception especially in the differentiation of greenwashing and genuine green marketing. Results have shown that consumers are becoming more sensitive to environmental claims, but the perceived honesty and openness of these claims is a major factor that determines whether they will trust a brand. When done in good faith, green marketing will increase brand trust and create long term loyalty, but when done as greenwashing, it may cause distrust, negative publicity, and loss of consumer confidence. The study points out the essentiality of authenticity in sustainability efforts by companies as well as the necessity of reporting them in a clear and verifiable manner. Finally, the research also adds to the better comprehension of the importance of ethical environmental practices and truthful marketing approaches as the factors that are vital not only to consumer trust but also to the long-run development of a brand in a progressively environmentally friendly market.

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