

GREEN AT THE OUTSET: INVESTIGATING GREENWASHING IN INDIAN MARKET

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ABSTRACT

As India focuses more on sustainability, many companies use environmental claims to appeal to those who care about the environment. Although some brands genuinely work to cut down their environmental footprint, others dishonestly use the label. As a result, businesses are using vague, overstated eco-friendly claims to appear environmentally friendly. With these tactics, consumers may feel responsible, but it gets hard for them to figure out if a company is sustainable. This paper looks into how Indian companies use greenwashing to promote themselves and how this affects consumer trust and a brand's credibility. Content analysis was performed on 50 advertisements from the fashion, FMCG, and electronics sectors. Three top Indian companies were studied using their sustainability campaigns. Also, a survey was conducted with 100 urban consumers about their perceptions of and trust in green advertising. The findings show that 61 percent of the commercials used unproven environmental claims. Of the case studies of three companies, two had apparent differences between what they said about protecting the environment and reality. 70 percent of consumers said they want environmentally friendly brands, yet less than 20 percent check the facts. These findings show that consumers trust is declining in the companies, which highlights the urgent need for transparent advertising regulations, truthful eco-labels, and improved public education in India to address greenwashing. Future research should include rural consumers and explore sector-specific regulations.

Keywords: *Greenwashing, Consumer Trust, Sustainable Marketing, Advertising Ethics, Brand Credibility.*

INTRODUCTION

Environmental sustainability has recently seen a strong shift from a smaller concern to an essential part of running companies and marketing. In this context, green marketing, i.e., promoting products based on environmental benefits, has become an influential tool for shaping consumer behavior (Delmas & Burbano, 2011). However, the growing prevalence of sustainability claims has also led to a surge in greenwashing, a term coined to describe practices where companies deceptively promote themselves as environmentally friendly without substantive actions to support these claims (TerraChoice, 2010).

As people in India are becoming more aware of climate change and sustainability, greenwashing is gaining attention as a serious problem. There has been quick growth in environmentally friendly shopping habits among city-living and middle-class Indians. However, not much is done to govern environmental advertising and adherence to ethical marketing guidelines is not adequately examined. As a result, firms often capitalize on this gap by making vague or unsubstantiated ecological claims (Fernando et al., 2014; Sensharma & Sinha, 2022). According to a recent study of Indian firms, many environmental, social, and governance (ESG) disclosures contained signs of greenwashing, leading to inflated

reputational benefits without delivering actual environmental impact (Sensharma et al., 2022)

Greenwashing misleads consumers, distorts market competition, and undermines genuine sustainability efforts. It damages consumer trust, devalues authentic green branding, and exposes firms to potential backlash once deceptive practices are revealed (Carlson et al., 1993; Krafft & Saito, 2014). In India, the trend of changing consumer tastes along with a greater focus on green products demands attention, but many individuals are unable to check the levels of pollution. This study aims to assess the prevalence and characteristics of greenwashing in Indian advertisements, analyze real-life case studies of Indian firms using sustainability as a marketing strategy, and understand consumer awareness, trust, and attitudes towards green claims in advertising.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Global Understanding of Greenwashing

Greenwashing describes situations when companies pretend to be more environmentally friendly than they truly are (Delmas & Burbano, 2011). It usually appears as confusing, unconfirmed or misleading statements about the environment that make the market less clear and change what people can decide for themselves. According to TerraChoice (2010), some prominent examples of greenwashing continue to be recognized worldwide due to their core “sins” like hidden trade-offs and nonexistent supporting evidence.

Studies show that greenwashing can significantly harm consumers and real sustainability measures. Leonidou and Skarmeas (2017) believe it can reduce consumer trust and make them less likely to accept green projects. Pedersen (2020) and Carlson et al. (1993) point out that dishonest environmental ads can cause consumers to reject the company, damage its reputation, and cause long-lasting harm to the brand. In addition, because regulations and ESG reporting vary significantly

across countries, there is a scope for manipulation (Testa et al., 2018).

The Indian Landscape of Greenwashing

India's economic growth and an increased commitment to environmental protection are pushing increased attention on green marketing and greenwashing. Sharma (2017) points out that many times, Indian advertisements mention eco-labels that are unclear, due to lack of strict governance. Fernando and his colleagues (2014) observed that over 50 percent of green advertising in India did not offer proof or relied on false pictures. According to Jog and Singhal (2020), there is a difference between how much people care about sustainability and how well they can test the validity of claims. Later studies confirm that companies are still profiting from concepts related to sustainability. According to Devireddy (2024), using eco-labels and making false green claims in marketing, businesses in India falsely present their environmental effects, harming trust and leading to promotion of unsustainable practices.

According to Gidage, Bhide and Bilan (2024), around half of the NIFTY 50 companies showed signs of greenwashing in their ESG reports, mainly in energy and manufacturing sectors. The research shows that independent directors work towards mitigating these effects. As pointed out by Verma (2022), greenwashing exists in India primarily to grow profits, as the rules are not strict and information is limited; which calls for new policies and better practices. The research by Vijayalakshmi (2024) also reveals that some FMCG companies make false green claims even though consumer protection laws are in place, suggesting that law enforcement is still not effective; although proper consumer laws exist, many firms still mislead customers because those laws are seldom enforced.

Direction for the Present Study

Much research has been undertaken on corporate greenwashing, and the literature on consumer views has also grown, but the above issues are not adequately addressed. None of the integrated research presents the bigger picture that

incorporates consumer trust and real business practices in advertising. To fill this gap, this study uses three different empirical methods: extensive study of advertisements, reviewing case studies of Indian firms, and testing how people feel about trusting the brands. Bringing together these viewpoints, the study gives a comprehensive framework of greenwashing and suggests practical steps that companies, customers and governments should follow.

METHODOLOGY

This research makes use of both qualitative and quantitative methods to look into greenwashing in the Indian market. The process is based on (i) examining the contents of ads, (ii) studying cases of Indian firms, and (iii) gathering opinions from consumers. With this design, the report can describe how greenwashing appears across different areas, such as the media, companies' actions, and what individual consumers perceive.

STUDYING THE CONTENT OF GREEN ADVERTISEMENTS

Greenwashing in Indian advertisements was studied by drawing a sample of 50 ads from four sectors, which included FMCG, apparel, electronics, and personal care. The advertisements from newspapers, social media, and digital channels in the first three months of 2024 were included. A checklist created from TerraChoice's "Seven Sins of Greenwashing" (2010) and the ASCI (2021) guidelines was used for every ad's assessment. The ads were reviewed along the following parameters before rating them as genuinely green, greenwashed, and unverifiable:

- Resorting to words that are left open to interpretation (e.g., "eco-friendly," "natural")
- Not having received third-party certification.
- A lack of precise data on the impact.
- Images and graphics that might mislead

CASE STUDIES FOCUSING ON INDIAN COMPANIES

Media coverage and sustainability reports were used to select three Indian companies with high-visibility environmental claims. There were specific selection requirements to meet which included ESG disclosures or advertising about sustainability broadcast to the general public.

Analysis of the companies was performed using a document-based strategy, which included, corporate sustainability reports, packaging and promotional materials, regulatory filings and third-party evaluations, and media articles and NGO watchdog reports. The analysis aimed to identify inconsistencies between companies' claims and practices, using thematic comparison to know greenwashing patterns (Delmas & Burbano, 2011).

CONSUMER SURVEY ON GREENWASHING AWARENESS

To understand how greenwashing affects consumer perception, a structured survey was conducted among 100 urban Indian consumers aged 18–45, residing in Delhi, Mumbai, Bengaluru, and Kolkata. The sample was collected using convenience and snowball sampling via in-person questionnaires (malls, supermarkets) and digital forms (google forms). The survey included demographic questions (age, education, income), awareness of terms like "green," "eco-friendly," and "sustainable", ability to recognize third-party certifications, trust in environmental claims by Indian brands, and purchase behavior related to green-labelled products.

Data was analyzed using simple descriptive statistics (frequencies, percentages) to identify awareness, trust, and verification behavior patterns.

ANALYSIS AND FINDINGS

The findings of this study are organized into three segments: content analysis of advertisements, corporate case study evaluations, and a consumer perception survey. Together, these provide a broad view of how greenwashing is practiced and perceived in the Indian market.

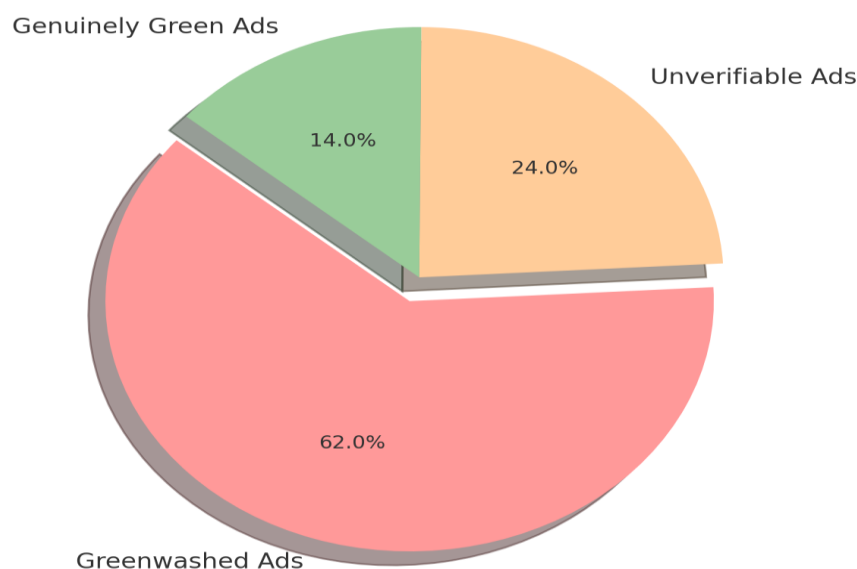
CONTENT ANALYSIS OF GREEN ADVERTISEMENTS

A total of 50 advertisements were analyzed from leading Indian brands across FMCG (Fast-Moving

Consumer Goods), apparel, electronics, cosmetics, and home care sectors.

Quantitative Summary: Of the total advertisements, 62 percent were the greenwashed ones (31), which contained vague or exaggerated environmental claims without supporting evidence. 24 percent were unverifiable ads (12), insufficient data was provided to evaluate authenticity. 14 percent (7) were backed by credible certifications such as BIS Eco-Mark, FSSAI green label, or global standards like energy star.

Distribution of Green Advertising Claims in Indian Ads (n=50)



COMMON PATTERNS OF GREENWASHING IN INDIAN ADVERTISEMENTS

The content analysis revealed recurring patterns of how greenwashing manifests across Indian advertising. These patterns reflect classic greenwashing tactics that TerraChoice (2010) outlined and reveal emerging forms tailored to digital platforms and urban consumers.

Usage of Fuzzy and indeterminate terminology and buzzwords: It was observed that firms often used words such as “eco-safe,” “natural,” “clean,” or “chemical-free” in misleading advertisements, without giving scientific facts or standards about these claims in about 84 percent of the reviewed ads. Because there were no specified terminology in law, these claims made no sense for the average person. This refers to “The Sin of Vagueness” found by TerraChoice and is in agreement with Sharma’s observations (2017) that advertisements from Indian

FMCG are often unclear. Customers are likely to trust businesses when such language is used, helping the firm from criticism from the public.

Deception through the use of symbols: Many of the reviewed advertisements (76 percent) included green colours, pictures of leaves and plants and environmentally friendly themes to show that their products were sustainable. Businesses often did this even though the product did not have much of an effect on the environment. They made use of the “halo effect,” which involves people rating products more positively because of the favorable images used in the ads (Leonidou & Skarmas, 2017). Devireddy (2024) pointed out that many brands in India use digital tools to make their advertising appear genuine, but they lacked the real content.

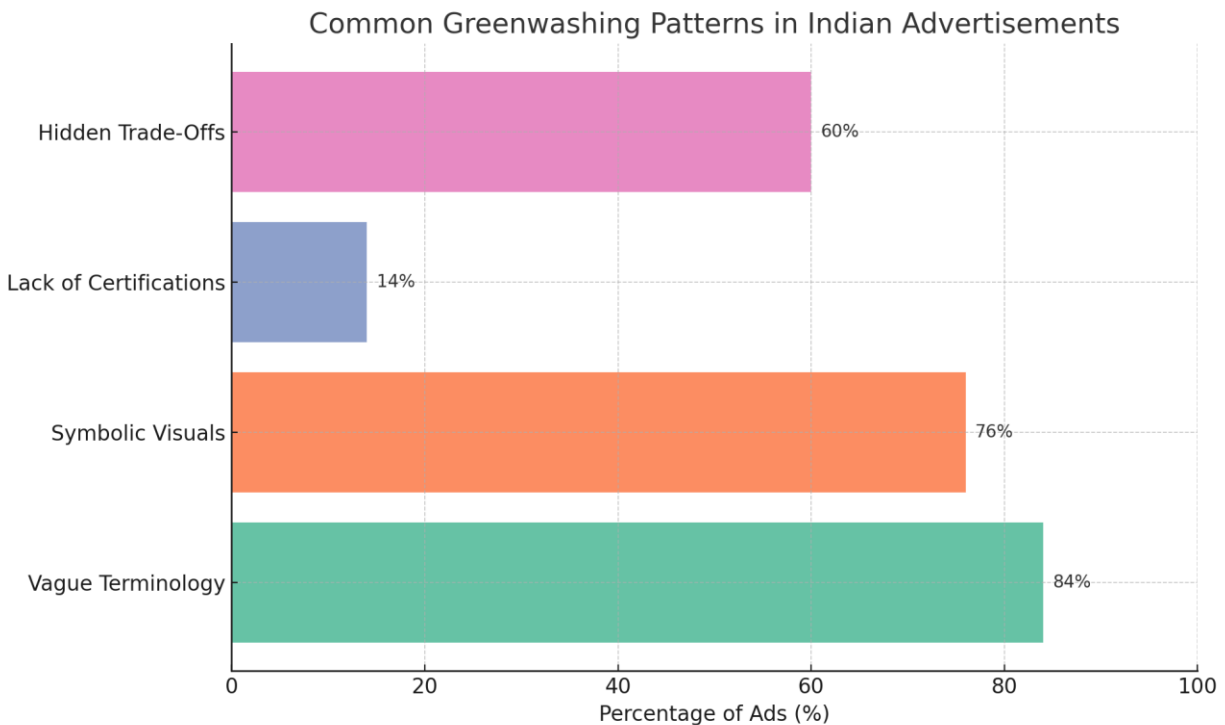
Lack of verifiable certifications: *Of the advertisements studied, only 14 percent, had the Eco-Mark or Energy Star eco-certification. Even when these issues were present, none of the ads offered links to clear sustainability criteria. This creates a major gap in transparency, because consumers do not have the means to see if information is authentic. Fernando et al. (2014) note that this practice not only confuses consumers, but also makes real certifications less meaningful to customers.*

Hidden trade-offs: Several ads were found to promote one environmentally positive feature, such

as recyclable packaging or reduced plastic use, while omitting critical factors like total product carbon footprint, energy sourcing, or end-of-life disposal challenges. This reflects the "Sin of the Hidden Trade-Off," wherein a single 'green' factor is spotlighted to distract from unsustainable practices. These deceptive tactics are particularly problematic in India, where sustainability narratives are still emerging and consumers often rely on simplified cues to assess eco-friendliness (Jog & Singhal, 2020).

INTERPRETATION AND IMPLICATIONS

It is clear from the above discussion that Fernando et al., (2014) and Sharma (2017) correctly pointed out that green marketing in India faces both weak verification and extensive use of symbolic manipulation. Further research (Devireddy, 2024) points out that companies rely more on visual elements in their greenwashing on online platforms. This is leading consumers to worry about ethical issues in advertising and their ability to choose environmentally friendly products. If the law enforcement is not strong, people may be fooled into buying green products, thereby undermining the efforts to protect the environment.



CASE STUDIES OF INDIAN COMPANIES

Three Indian companies were selected based on high brand visibility, widespread green marketing claims, and media coverage of their sustainability efforts. The case evaluations revealed varying levels of alignment between public messaging and actual practices.

Company A (Personal Care Brand in the FMCG Sector): The company claimed in their promotion as using 100 percent natural and sustainable packaging. However, the product packaging consisted of plastic tubes without recyclability labels. CSR reports did not mention packaging sustainability, and no third-party audits were reported. Thus, it was a clear case of surface-level greenwashing, using vague claims without measurable action or verification.

Company B (Home Appliance Brand in Electronics): The brand claimed that their products are designed to save the planet, energy-efficient and toxin-free”.

While some products were BEE-certified, materials were sourced from suppliers with environmental violations. Sustainability reports were filled in non-committal language and lacked key performance indicators. Thus, there was evidence of strategic greenwashing, highlighting key certified features to hide broader non-compliance in the supply chain.

Company C (Apparel Brand in Ethnic Fashion): The company claimed to have used recycled cotton with zero-waste dyeing process. It was found to be sourcing recycled materials from an NGO and initiated a sustainability audit. It was a case of adopting genuine sustainability, driven by public scrutiny and stakeholder engagement.

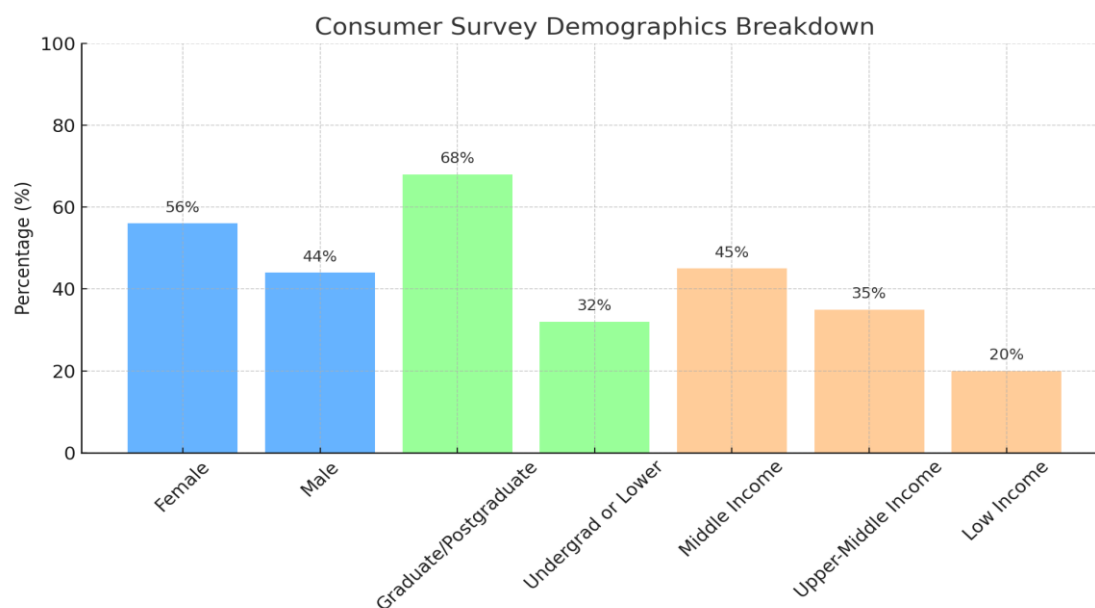
Overall, two of three companies displayed significant inconsistencies between their environmental claims and business operations, supporting patterns noted in Gidage et al. (2024) and Verma (2024) regarding selective transparency and accountability gaps in Indian firms.

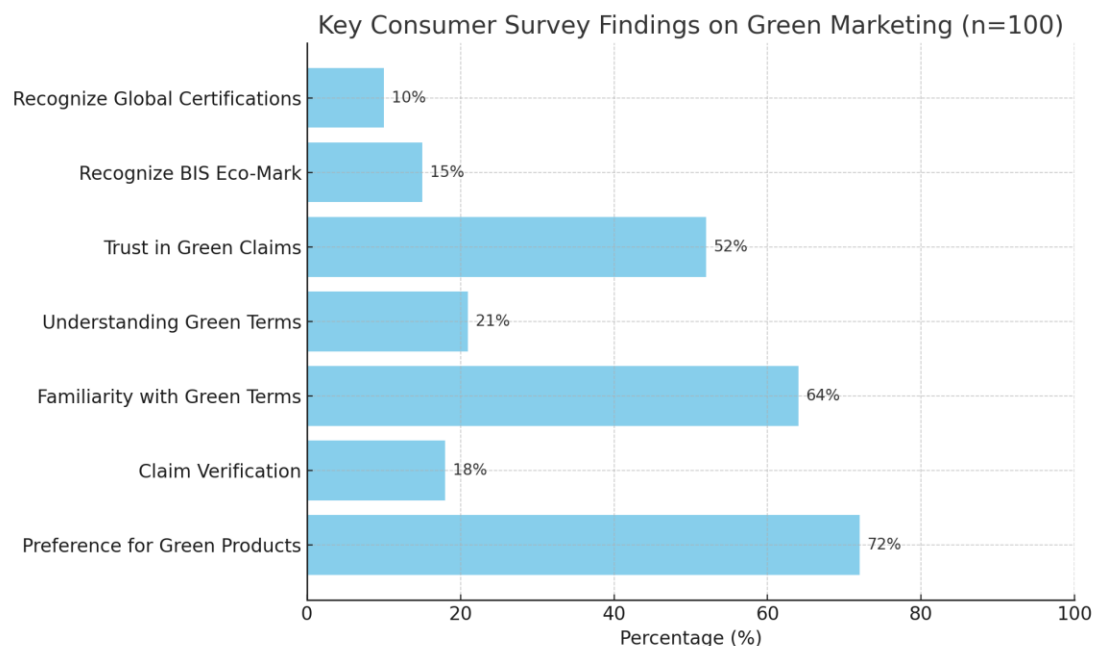
CONSUMER SURVEY RESULTS

A survey of 100 Indian consumers (18–45 years old) living in Delhi NCR, Mumbai, Bengaluru and Kolkata was conducted using questionnaires. The demographics of the survey included 56 percent women and 44 percent men; 68 percent were graduates and post graduates and 45 percent were from middle income group while 35 percent and 20 percent respondents were from upper- and lower-income brackets respectively.

The data collected reveals consumers attitudes about and experiences with green marketing. 72 percent respondents reported to be “more likely” to buy from brands claiming to be eco-friendly as they are conscious about their purchase decisions and preferred to buy environmentally

friendly products. Hence, they rely on claims made by the brands and perceive them to be genuine. When checked about consumers’ familiarity with the terms signifying Green Marketing measures, 64 percent had encountered terms like natural, green or biodegradable but only 21 percent could correctly identify the implication of these terms. 52 percent said they marginally trusted green claims and wouldn’t bother to verify them. It was discovered that only 18 percent of the consumers would actually bother to check the product details and third party certifications to verify sustainability claims. Only 15 percent could actually recognise the BIS Eco-Mark, and fewer had heard of international labels like Energy Star or USDA Organic.





In response to the open-ended questions, many consumers believed that green labels are mostly a marketing gimmick. While some expressed willingness to pay more for genuine green products if verified by credible third parties, others appeared confused with too many claims, not sure as to what is real and what is fake; consistent with Jog and Singhal (2020), where brands build goodwill based on sustainability due to lack of questioning from the consumers.

DISCUSSION AND INTERPRETATION

Interpretation of Advertising Practices

The content analysis revealed that of the green-themed advertisements, 62 percent qualified as greenwashing, consistent with earlier Indian studies (Fernando et al., 2014; Sharma, 2017). Most of these ads relied on vague language and symbolic imagery, aligning with TerraChoice's (2010) "sins" of greenwashing—particularly the "Sin of Vagueness" and "Sin of Irrelevance." Without third-party validation, the continued use of eco-buzzwords and visuals reflects an image-driven strategy where firms prioritize perception over measurable environmental action.

These results go along with previous findings by Carlson et al. (1993) and Leonidou and Skarmas (2017) that deceiving consumers about the sustainability of products hurts their trust in brands and the brands reputation in the long run. Only 14 percent of the ads included real information on sustainability which is a testimony to lack of regulatory mechanism and regular checks.

Greenwashing at the Corporate Level

Two out of three companies studied demonstrated significant gaps between green messaging and internal environmental performance. These inconsistencies reflect global patterns described by Delmas and Burbano (2011) and local disclosures analyzed by Gidage et al. (2024), who observed widespread greenwashing in Indian ESG reports. Strategic greenwashing in Indian firms is often driven not by intentional deceit alone but also by weak corporate governance and fragmented ESG knowledge (Verma, 2024). However, the transitional progress observed in Company C approach, through third-party audits and NGO partnerships, indicates that external accountability mechanisms can incentivise authentic action.

Pro-environmental attitudes are strong among consumers (72 percent), yet barely one in five actually check information about the product being environmentally friendly. This gap supports findings from Jog and Singhal (2020) and aligns with the Affect–Reason–Involvement (ARI) framework, which suggests that low consumer involvement with environmental metrics leads to reliance on surface cues like packaging, color or catchphrases (Nyilasy et al., 2014). The data indicates that although Indian consumers value sustainability, they are susceptible to deceptive green marketing because of lack of necessary knowledge and resources.

REGULATORY AND ETHICAL IMPLICATIONS

Though evolving, India's advertising and ESG regulation systems lack sectoral depth and enforceability. ASCI provides only broad frameworks, and there is no integrated mechanism for verifying or penalizing deceptive environmental claims (Devireddy, 2024). As Gidage et al. (2024) note, transparency and reporting vary dramatically among different businesses.

There are many concerns about this practice from an ethical point of view. Misleading green claims take advantage of customers, affect market competition unfairly and stop companies from seriously adopting sustainable practices (Pedersen, 2020). Missing regulations in favour of sustainable claims could dilute India's commitments to environment and climate.

CONTRIBUTIONS AND RELEVANCE

The study advances research further by bringing together advertising content, behavior of companies and consumer reactions into a unified approach. This work develops further by offering real data and useful tips for several stakeholders, following on from Sharma (2017) and Devireddy (2024). It is found that to handle greenwashing in India, changes are needed from media, businesses, policymakers and members of civil society.

IMPLICATIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

For businesses: Short-term greenwashing gains come at the cost of long-term brand erosion and potential legal liability (Pedersen, 2020). Authentic sustainability leaders are penalized in environments where deceptive marketing is tolerated and faces no consequences (Delmas & Burbano, 2011). In order to contain this, it must be mandated to conduct third-party life cycle assessments, adopt transparent ESG metrics and disclosures and use recognized eco-labels (e.g., BIS Eco-Mark, LEED)

For policymakers and regulators: India's current advertising code lacks enforceable standards on environmental claims. ESG reporting is inconsistent and non-comparable (Gidage et al., 2024). This could be improved by clearly defining legal terms like "green" and "sustainable"; make product-level environmental data public for easy access; establish QR-linked verification and complaint portals for quick redressals and incorporate third-party certification into ASCI guidelines.

For Consumers: Emotional affinity toward sustainability is undermined by indulging in greenwashing practices, creating fertile ground for deceptive marketing and trust deficit (Jog & Singhal, 2020). The businesses could run media campaigns on reading green labels; promote consumer-facing tools like apps, QR scanners, watchdog websites to directly interact with consumers for immediate resolution of their issues and develop simplified rating systems for green ads and brands.

For Media: Investigative coverage and reporting of greenwashing are sporadic and lacks scientific support, limiting its impact. The media could conduct independent sector-wide audits with academic partners; publish "greenwashing scorecards" for public access and Collaborate with ASCI and consumer forums to augment verified findings.

FUTURE RISKS AND THE ROAD AHEAD

Uncontrolled greenwashing can result in a fake and shallow version of sustainability, with marketing taking over the real work. This creates trust deficit among consumers and dilutes companies' accountability for investing in sustainability. As India moves closer to becoming net-zero economy and promotes circular economy methods attempting at minimising waste and maximise resource use, the authenticity and dependability of pro environmental statements should be made a main concern by law and ethics. Without proper actions in checking, teaching and enforcing green marketing could simply help companies get a good reputation in the short run. Being transparent in India's sustainability stories makes certain that both the nation and the world respect it.

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