

# Greenwashing In Advertising: Decoding Media's Environmental Claims

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## Abstract

*Greenwashing, the practice of making misleading or exaggerated environmental claims, has emerged as a significant challenge in advertising amid growing consumer demand for sustainability. This article explores the multifaceted nature of greenwashing, examining its psychological underpinnings, regulatory frameworks, digital amplification, eco-label complexities, and counter-narratives that empower ethical consumption. Drawing on scholarly literature and real-world examples, including verified cases from India (e.g., Godrej's mosquito repellent, Zomato's "Green Delivery") and hypothetical scenarios, the analysis reveals how cognitive biases, emotional storytelling, and digital platforms enable deceptive claims. Regulatory gaps, particularly in India's Advertising Standards Council of India (ASCI) and Central Consumer Protection Authority (CCPA) frameworks, allow greenwashing to persist, while unverified eco-labels exacerbate consumer confusion. Counter-narratives through media literacy, advocacy, and technology offer hope for accountability. The article concludes that fostering critical thinking and robust enforcement is essential to align corporate claims with genuine sustainability, contributing to informed consumer choices globally and in India.*

## Keywords

*Greenwashing, sustainability, advertising, consumer psychology, cognitive biases, eco-labels, digital media, social media influencers, regulatory frameworks, media literacy, ethical consumption, and environmental claims.*

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## INTRODUCTION

In an era where climate change dominates global discourse, consumers are increasingly drawn to brands that champion sustainability. However, not all environmental claims hold up under scrutiny. Greenwashing—the practice of making misleading or exaggerated claims about a product's environmental benefits—has become a pervasive issue in advertising. From vague buzzwords like “eco-friendly” to questionable certifications, companies exploit the growing demand for sustainable products to enhance their image and boost sales. This 5,000-word article weaves together the psychological underpinnings of greenwashing, its regulatory challenges, the role of digital media in amplifying deceptive claims, the complexities of eco-labels, and the rise of counter-narratives that empower consumers. By drawing on scholarly literature and real-world examples, including verified and hypothetical cases from India, this narrative offers a cohesive exploration of greenwashing and its implications for ethical consumption.

### *The Psychology of Greenwashing: Why Consumers Fall for It*

Greenwashing thrives because it taps into the psychological vulnerabilities of consumers eager to make environmentally responsible choices. Cognitive biases shape how we perceive and trust environmental claims, often leading us to accept them at face value. The halo effect is particularly potent: a single positive attribute, like a “recycled packaging” label, can create an impression that an entire product or brand is sustainable, even when evidence suggests otherwise (Parguel et al., 2015). For instance, a shampoo bottle touting “natural ingredients” might overshadow the brand's reliance on environmentally harmful production processes. Similarly, confirmation bias drives consumers who value sustainability to embrace vague claims like “green” or “eco-friendly” without questioning their validity, as these align with their desire to support ethical brands (Delmas & Burbano, 2011). This tendency is compounded by optimism bias, where consumers overestimate the environmental impact of their purchases, believing that choosing “green” products significantly reduces their ecological footprint (Chen & Chang, 2013).

In India, this psychological manipulation is evident in a case involving Godrej Consumer Products Limited. In 2022, the Advertising Standards Council of India (ASCI) issued a notice against Godrej for advertising its “Goodknight Natural Mosquito Repellent” as “100% natural” and “chemical-free.” The

claims suggested a completely eco-friendly product, leveraging the halo effect to imply broader sustainability. However, ASCI found that the product contained synthetic ingredients, misleading consumers who trusted the “natural” label due to confirmation bias. ASCI directed Godrej to modify the advertisement to reflect accurate ingredient information, highlighting how brands exploit psychological biases in a market with growing eco-consciousness (S&R Associates, 2025).

Beyond cognitive biases, greenwashing exploits emotional drivers, particularly consumer guilt. Many feel a personal responsibility for climate change and seek to alleviate this through their purchasing decisions (Mazar & Zhong, 2010). Brands capitalize on this by framing their products as solutions to global problems. Fast-fashion giant H&M, for example, launched its “Conscious Collection” in 2019, using serene green imagery and phrases like “sustainability first” to appeal to guilt-ridden consumers. Yet, investigations revealed that the collection’s environmental benefits were minimal compared to H&M’s broader reliance on unsustainable practices (Niinimäki et al., 2020). Emotional storytelling—featuring lush forests, clean oceans, or thriving wildlife—further enhances greenwashing’s effectiveness by evoking hope and a connection to nature, reducing skepticism and fostering brand loyalty (Hartmann & Apaolaza-Ibanez, 2012).

To illustrate this in an Indian context, consider a hypothetical scenario: a personal care brand launches a “Green Living” campaign for its shampoo, using visuals of pristine Himalayan streams and claims of “biodegradable ingredients.” The campaign taps into consumer guilt about plastic pollution, suggesting the product is a sustainable choice. However, the shampoo’s packaging is non-recyclable, and the “biodegradable” claim lacks verification, exploiting emotional storytelling to obscure the product’s true environmental impact. Such tactics, while not tied to a specific real case, reflect the emotional manipulation seen in Indian advertising, where brands leverage nature imagery to appeal to environmentally conscious consumers (CAG, 2025).

The sheer volume of advertising content exacerbates these vulnerabilities. Consumers often lack the time or expertise to verify claims, relying instead on trust in brands or labels. Terms like “carbon-neutral” or “biodegradable” sound authoritative but are frequently used without clear definitions or evidence (Lyon & Montgomery, 2015). This is particularly true in industries like cosmetics or food, where terms like “organic” or “natural” are loosely regulated, leading to widespread misuse (Schmuck et al., 2018). A 2020 study found that 40% of “natural” cosmetic products contained synthetic ingredients, highlighting the gap between claims and reality (Smith & Paladino, 2010). In India, Ekam Eco Solutions Pvt. Ltd. faced ASCI scrutiny in 2022 for advertising its Zerodar CARE Natural Hand Wash Liquid as “eco-friendly” without sufficient evidence. The claim misled consumers navigating information overload, and ASCI’s intervention required the company to substantiate or withdraw the ad, demonstrating how trust in vague terms can be exploited (Mondaq, 2025). As consumers navigate this information overload, the trust they place in brands becomes a weak point that greenwashing exploits, setting the stage for the regulatory challenges that struggle to keep pace.

### ***Regulations and Accountability: Who Polices Green Claims?***

The subjective nature of environmental claims makes regulating greenwashing a daunting task. In the United States, the Federal Trade Commission (FTC) oversees green marketing through its Green Guides, introduced in 1992 and updated in 2012. These guidelines advise companies to avoid vague terms like “eco-friendly” unless substantiated with specific evidence (FTC, 2012). However, the guides are non-binding, and enforcement is sporadic, with penalties often dwarfed by corporate profits (Delmas & Burbano, 2011). In the European Union, stricter measures like the Directive on Unfair Commercial Practices (2005) and the proposed Green Claims Directive (2023) require verifiable evidence for claims like “climate-neutral” (European Commission, 2023). Yet, enforcement varies across member states, and the lack of a universal definition of “sustainable” creates loopholes that companies exploit (Lyon & Maxwell, 2011).

In India, the Advertising Standards Council of India (ASCI), a self-regulatory body, plays a key role in monitoring greenwashing. Its Guidelines for Advertisements Making Environmental/Green Claims, effective from February 15, 2024, mandate that claims like “eco-friendly” be backed by reliable scientific evidence or credible certifications. Non-compliance can lead to recommendations for ad modification or withdrawal, and cases may be referred to the Central Consumer Protection Authority (CCPA) for legal

action under the Consumer Protection Act, 2019 (S&R Associates, 2025). The CCPA's Guidelines for Prevention and Regulation of Greenwashing, finalized on October 15, 2024, further strengthen this framework by outlawing vague terms and requiring transparency through tools like QR codes on packaging (CAG, 2025). Despite these efforts, ASCI's recommendations are not legally binding, and enforcement relies on cooperation or reputational pressure, highlighting the need for stronger legal frameworks (Mondaq, 2025).

Globally, advertising standards bodies like the Advertising Standards Authority (ASA) in the UK and Ad Standards in Canada review consumer complaints about greenwashing, issuing warnings or requiring ad withdrawals. However, their limited powers and minimal fines often fail to deter large corporations (ASA, 2022). The absence of a clear, global standard for "green" claims complicates accountability, as terms like "sustainable" remain inherently subjective. Moreover, regulators often lack the resources to monitor the vast number of claims, allowing smaller companies to fly under the radar while larger ones leverage legal teams to navigate or delay penalties (Furlow, 2010).

High-profile cases illustrate the consequences of greenwashing when scrutiny does occur. In 2015, Volkswagen's Dieselgate scandal revealed that the company had installed software to cheat emissions tests, marketing its diesel vehicles as "low-emission." The fallout included \$30 billion in fines and lawsuits, exposing the need for stronger oversight in the automotive industry (Hotten, 2015). Similarly, BP's "Beyond Petroleum" campaign, launched in 2000 with a green sunburst logo, suggested a shift to renewables. The 2010 Deepwater Horizon oil spill revealed BP's continued reliance on fossil fuels, leading to public outrage and legal scrutiny (Cherry & Sneirson, 2011). More recently, H&M's "Conscious Collection" (2021) faced criticism for misleading claims about its "sustainable" materials, prompting calls for stricter regulations in the fashion industry (Niinimäki et al., 2020).

In India, ASCI addressed a case involving a strawberry shower scrub in 2022, where a brand claimed the product's container was made of "30% recycled plastic." ASCI found the claim misleading, as it lacked evidence and implied broader environmental benefits, leading to a directive to modify the advertisement (S&R Associates, 2025). Similarly, a hypothetical Indian example could involve a beverage company advertising its bottles as "100% recyclable" with images of green fields, suggesting eco-friendliness. If the bottles require specialized facilities unavailable in most Indian cities, the claim could mislead consumers, reflecting the regulatory challenges ASCI and CCPA face in ensuring truthful advertising (CAG, 2025). These cases underscore how regulatory gaps allow greenwashing to flourish, particularly as digital media amplifies its reach.

### ***Digital Media's Role in Amplifying Greenwashing***

The rise of digital media has transformed greenwashing into a more pervasive and sophisticated issue. Social media influencers, often perceived as authentic voices, are frequently enlisted to promote "sustainable" products. Yet, many lack the expertise to evaluate claims, and paid partnerships blur the line between genuine endorsement and marketing (Kapitan & Silvera, 2016). A 2022 report by the Changing Markets Foundation found that 60% of green claims made by fashion influencers were misleading or unsubstantiated, illustrating the scale of the problem (Changing Markets Foundation, 2022). Native advertising—ads designed to blend with editorial content—further muddies the waters. Articles or videos titled "Top 10 Eco-Friendly Products" may seem impartial but are often sponsored by brands with questionable credentials, exploiting consumer trust in seemingly objective content (Wojdyski & Evans, 2016).

In India, a 2023 case involving Zomato's "Green Delivery" campaign illustrates this issue. Zomato promoted its delivery service as "eco-friendly" on social media, with influencers highlighting electric vehicle use. However, a Centre for Science and Environment (CSE) analysis revealed that only a small fraction of deliveries used electric vehicles, and the campaign's claims overstated the environmental benefits. ASCI required Zomato to clarify the scope of its "green" deliveries, demonstrating how influencer-driven campaigns can amplify misleading claims (Council on Sustainable Development, 2023). Social media algorithms exacerbate greenwashing by tailoring ads to user interests. Consumers who engage with environmental content are more likely to see targeted ads for "green" products, regardless of their authenticity (Tandoc & Eng, 2019). This creates an echo chamber where misleading claims are reinforced, as seen with brands like Shein, which have promoted "eco-conscious" collections despite

environmentally harmful practices (Nguyen, 2023). The use of green filters (e.g., Instagram's nature-themed overlays) and hashtags like #SustainableLiving or #EcoFriendly further amplifies greenwashing by creating visual associations with sustainability, even when claims lack substance. A 2023 Greenpeace analysis found that 40% of #EcoFriendly posts on Instagram featured products with no verifiable environmental benefits (Greenpeace, 2023).

To illustrate this in India, consider a hypothetical scenario: a fashion brand partners with Instagram influencers to promote a "sustainable" clothing line using #EcoFriendly hashtags and green-tinted filters. The campaign claims the clothes are made from "organic cotton," but the cotton is conventionally sourced with significant environmental impacts. This mirrors real-world tactics where digital platforms amplify unverified claims, leveraging algorithms to target eco-conscious consumers (CAG, 2025).

Digital platforms also enable brands to craft elaborate sustainability narratives through storytelling. Coca-Cola's "World Without Waste" campaign, launched in 2018, promised recyclable packaging by 2030, earning widespread praise. However, critics pointed out the company's reliance on single-use plastics and slow progress, labeling it greenwashing (Ellen MacArthur Foundation, 2022). Such campaigns, amplified by viral videos and social media, shape public perception with emotional narratives that obscure reality. The digital landscape, while amplifying greenwashing, also intersects with the growing use of eco-labels, which promise clarity but often add to the confusion.

#### ***The Rise of Eco-Labels and Certifications: Trust or Trap?***

Eco-labels and certifications, such as Fair Trade, USDA Organic, and Energy Star, are designed to guide consumers toward sustainable products. When backed by rigorous standards, these labels offer clarity in a crowded market (D'Souza et al., 2007). The Forest Stewardship Council (FSC), for example, certifies sustainably sourced timber, providing a reliable benchmark for responsible forestry (Auld et al., 2008). However, not all eco-labels are trustworthy. Some companies create their own certifications, lacking independent verification. The Sustainable Forestry Initiative (SFI), used by the paper industry, has been criticized for weaker standards compared to the FSC (Cashore et al., 2007). Similarly, unregulated terms like "100% natural" or "biodegradable" mislead consumers, as they often lack clear criteria (Schmuck et al., 2018).

In India, a 2022 case involving a vegetable cleaning liquid highlights this issue. A brand advertised its product as "eco-friendly" and "natural," with a green leaf logo resembling an eco-label. ASCI found that the product contained synthetic chemicals and lacked third-party certification, misleading consumers about its environmental impact. The company was directed to remove the misleading claims, illustrating how unverified eco-labels exploit consumer trust (S&R Associates, 2025). In a hypothetical Indian scenario, a tea brand might label its product "certified organic" with a green logo, implying certification like the Jaivik Bharat logo. If the tea lacks certification from recognized organic bodies, the claim could mislead consumers, reflecting the broader issue of certification fatigue (CAG, 2025).

The proliferation of eco-labels creates certification fatigue, where consumers struggle to distinguish credible seals from dubious ones (Horne, 2009). A 2021 ISO study found that 30% of eco-labels lacked transparent criteria, eroding trust (ISO, 2021). The Rainforest Alliance, for instance, faced scrutiny in 2020 when investigations revealed that some certified farms were linked to deforestation and labor abuses, despite the green frog logo signaling sustainability (Greenpeace, 2020). This case underscores the need for transparency and accountability in certification programs.

Efforts to address these issues include standardized criteria from organizations like the Global Ecolabelling Network (GEN) and government-backed programs like the EU's Ecolabel, which requires rigorous audits (GEN, 2023; European Commission, 2023). Scholarly research emphasizes that consumer education is critical for navigating eco-labels effectively (Thøgersen et al., 2010). As consumers grapple with these complexities, counter-narratives and media literacy are emerging as vital tools to empower ethical decision-making.

#### ***Counter-Narratives and Media Literacy: Empowering Ethical Consumers***

The fight against greenwashing is gaining momentum through counter-narratives that challenge deceptive claims and empower consumers. Media literacy campaigns play a pivotal role by equipping individuals with the tools to spot misleading claims. Organizations like Eco-Business and GreenBiz publish guides on identifying greenwashing, such as vague language or unverifiable certifications (Eco-Business, 2023).

Initiatives like Media Literacy Now offer workshops and online courses that teach consumers to question marketing narratives and seek evidence, fostering critical thinking (Media Literacy Now, 2023).

Consumer advocacy groups like Consumer Reports and Which? actively investigate greenwashing, holding companies accountable through detailed reports. A 2023 Which? investigation exposed misleading claims by UK supermarkets about “eco-friendly” packaging, sparking public debate (Which?, 2023). In India, the Centre for Science and Environment (CSE) has been instrumental in exposing greenwashing. For example, its 2020 study found that many cleaning products marketed as “eco-friendly” contained harmful chemicals, prompting consumer awareness campaigns and regulatory scrutiny (Council on Sustainable Development, 2023). Activist media, such as Extinction Rebellion’s social media campaigns, amplify these efforts by calling out greenwashing in real time, mobilizing public pressure (Extinction Rebellion, 2023). Investigative journalism also plays a crucial role, with outlets like The Guardian and Vox publishing exposés on dubious environmental claims (The Guardian, 2023). Documentaries like *The True Cost* (2015) and *Seaspiracy* (2021) have brought attention to greenwashing in the fashion and fishing industries, respectively, inspiring consumer activism (Morgan, 2015; Tabrizi, 2021).

Technology is another powerful ally in this fight. Apps like Good On You and Think Dirty allow consumers to scan products and access sustainability ratings based on transparent criteria (Good On You, 2023). Blockchain platforms like Provenance enable verifiable supply chain data, enhancing transparency and helping consumers make informed choices (Provenance, 2023). These tools bridge the gap between intent and action, empowering consumers to navigate the complexities of greenwashing (Thøgersen et al., 2010). In a hypothetical Indian context, an app could allow consumers to scan a “sustainable” coffee brand’s QR code, revealing that its “eco-friendly” claim lacks third-party certification, empowering informed purchasing decisions.

Grassroots movements, amplified by social media, are also driving change. Hashtags like #StopGreenwashing and #WhoMadeMyClothes have mobilized consumers to demand accountability from brands (Fashion Revolution, 2023). The Fashion Revolution movement, launched after the 2013 Rana Plaza collapse, encourages consumers to question supply chains, reducing the effectiveness of greenwashing tactics (Niinimäki et al., 2020). These collective efforts—spanning media literacy, advocacy, journalism, technology, and activism—are reshaping the landscape, pushing brands toward greater transparency and accountability.

### **Recommendations**

To combat greenwashing and promote genuine sustainability in advertising, a cohesive strategy is essential, integrating regulatory, industry, and consumer-focused measures. First, strengthen regulatory frameworks by making guidelines legally binding and enforceable. In India, the Advertising Standards Council of India (ASCI) and Central Consumer Protection Authority (CCPA) should transition their guidelines into mandatory regulations with significant penalties for non-compliance, aligning with the EU’s stricter Green Claims Directive (European Commission, 2023). Globally, a universal definition of “sustainable” should be established to reduce ambiguity, supported by international cooperation to harmonize standards (Lyon & Maxwell, 2011). Second, enhance eco-label transparency by mandating third-party verification for all certifications, as seen with the EU’s Ecolabel program (GEN, 2023). In India, expanding the Jaivik Bharat organic certification’s scope to cover more products could reduce misuse of unverified labels, as seen in cases like the vegetable cleaning liquid (S&R Associates, 2025). Third, promote media literacy through nationwide campaigns, building on initiatives like Media Literacy Now and India’s Centre for Science and Environment (CSE), to educate consumers on spotting vague claims, as demonstrated in cases like Zomato’s “Green Delivery” (Council on Sustainable Development, 2023). Fourth, leverage technology by encouraging the adoption of apps like Good On You and blockchain platforms like Provenance to provide verifiable sustainability data, empowering consumers to make informed choices (Thøgersen et al., 2010). Finally, support grassroots activism, such as India’s growing #StopGreenwashing movement, to amplify consumer pressure on brands, as seen with global movements like Fashion Revolution (Fashion Revolution, 2023). By integrating these efforts, regulators, brands, and consumers can collaboratively dismantle greenwashing, ensuring that environmental claims reflect genuine sustainability.

## CONCLUSION

Greenwashing in advertising is a multifaceted challenge that exploits consumer psychology, thrives in regulatory gaps, and is amplified by digital media. Eco-labels, while offering potential for clarity, often add to the confusion when misused. In India, verified cases like Godrej's mosquito repellent, Ekam Eco Solutions' hand wash, a strawberry shower scrub, and Zomato's "Green Delivery" highlight the prevalence of greenwashing, underscoring the importance of ASCI and CCPA guidelines. Hypothetical scenarios further illustrate how these issues manifest in the Indian market, reflecting global trends. Yet, the rise of counter-narratives—through media literacy, consumer advocacy, investigative journalism, technology, and grassroots movements—is empowering consumers to challenge deceptive claims. As public awareness grows and pressure mounts, brands face increasing scrutiny to align their actions with their environmental promises. By fostering critical thinking and supporting accountability mechanisms, society can move toward a future where sustainability is not just a marketing buzzword but a tangible reality.

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