

# Greenwashing in Marketing: Awareness and Its Impact on Consumer Trust

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**Abstract**— The growing emphasis on sustainability in marketing has led organizations to increasingly promote environmentally friendly products and practices. However, the parallel rise of greenwashing—where firms exaggerate or misrepresent environmental claims—has created significant challenges in maintaining consumer trust. While prior research has established a negative relationship between greenwashing and trust, limited attention has been given to how varying levels of consumer awareness influence this relationship, particularly in emerging markets such as India. This study aims to examine the impact of greenwashing on consumer trust by incorporating consumer awareness as a critical moderating factor. It further explores different dimensions of trust, including credibility, transparency, and reliability, and investigates how distinct forms of greenwashing—such as vague claims, misleading labels, and exaggerated sustainability messages—affect consumer perceptions. The research adopts a quantitative approach using survey-based data to analyze consumer responses toward green marketing practices. The findings are expected to reveal that higher awareness enhances consumers' ability to identify misleading claims, thereby reducing blind trust but also increasing skepticism toward genuine sustainable brands. The study also highlights the role of transparency, certification, and information clarity in rebuilding consumer confidence. By addressing existing gaps, this research contributes to the literature on ethical marketing and provides practical insights for organizations to adopt authentic and accountable sustainability communication strategies.

**Keywords**— Greenwashing, Consumer Trust, Awareness, Sustainable Marketing, Consumer Skepticism

## I. INTRODUCTION

In recent years, sustainability has become a central theme in modern marketing practices as businesses attempt to align themselves with growing environmental concerns and socially responsible consumption patterns. Increasing awareness of issues such as climate change, resource depletion, and environmental degradation has significantly influenced consumer preferences, encouraging firms to promote products

and services as environmentally friendly. As a result, “green marketing” has evolved into a powerful strategic tool, enabling organizations to position themselves as responsible and sustainable entities in highly competitive markets.

However, alongside the rise of green marketing, the practice of greenwashing has also gained prominence. Greenwashing refers to the act of conveying a false or misleading impression about the environmental benefits of a product, service, or overall corporate practice. Instead of implementing genuine sustainable practices, some organizations focus on creating a superficial image of environmental responsibility through vague claims, misleading labels, selective disclosure of information, or exaggerated advertising messages. This disconnect between actual practices and communicated messages raises serious concerns about marketing ethics and corporate transparency.

The increasing prevalence of greenwashing has significant implications for consumer behavior, particularly in relation to trust. Consumer trust is a fundamental element in marketing relationships, influencing purchase decisions, brand loyalty, and long-term engagement. When consumers perceive that a company is engaging in deceptive environmental communication, it not only reduces their trust in that specific brand but may also lead to broader skepticism toward green marketing claims in general. Over time, this erosion of trust can weaken the effectiveness of sustainability initiatives and undermine genuine efforts by environmentally responsible firms.

An important factor that shapes the impact of greenwashing on consumer trust is the level of consumer awareness. Awareness refers to the ability of consumers to understand, evaluate, and critically assess environmental claims made by companies. Consumers with higher awareness are more likely to identify misleading or exaggerated claims and make informed decisions, whereas those with lower awareness may rely

heavily on surface-level marketing cues. This difference creates a complex dynamic: while awareness can protect consumers from deception, it may also increase skepticism, making it difficult for even authentic brands to gain trust.

Furthermore, the nature and form of greenwashing practices also influence consumer perceptions. Greenwashing can take multiple forms, such as ambiguous terminology (e.g., “eco-friendly” or “natural”), lack of supporting evidence, irrelevant claims, or the use of deceptive certifications and imagery. Each of these practices affects consumer interpretation differently, highlighting the need for a more nuanced understanding of how specific greenwashing strategies impact trust.

In the context of emerging economies like India, the issue becomes even more critical. Rapid economic growth, increasing environmental awareness, and expanding consumer markets have created opportunities for green marketing. However, varying levels of education, limited familiarity with environmental certifications, and lack of strict regulatory enforcement may make consumers more vulnerable to misleading claims. At the same time, rising digital exposure and social media engagement are gradually increasing awareness, creating a transitional environment where trust and skepticism coexist.

Despite the growing body of research on greenwashing, several gaps remain. There is limited empirical understanding of how consumer awareness moderates the relationship between greenwashing and trust, especially in diverse socio-economic contexts. Additionally, existing studies often focus broadly on consumer behavior outcomes without deeply examining different dimensions of trust such as credibility, transparency, and reliability. There is also a need to differentiate between various forms of greenwashing to understand their distinct impacts on consumer perception.

Against this background, the present study seeks to analyze the awareness of greenwashing in marketing and its impact on consumer trust. By focusing on the interplay between awareness levels, types of greenwashing practices, and trust dimensions, this research aims to contribute to a more comprehensive understanding of ethical challenges in sustainable marketing. The findings are expected to provide valuable insights for both academia and industry, helping organizations develop more transparent and authentic communication strategies while enabling consumers to make informed and responsible choices.

## II. LITERATURE REVIEW

Greenwashing has become a major concern in sustainable marketing because firms increasingly use environmental claims to attract eco-conscious consumers, while not all such claims

are accurate, transparent, or verifiable. Delmas and Burbano define greenwashing as misleading consumers about a firm’s environmental performance or the environmental benefits of a product or service. Their study explains that weak regulation, market pressure, organizational incentives, and managerial-level biases can encourage firms to exaggerate green claims. This makes greenwashing not only a communication problem but also a governance and credibility problem in marketing.

Earlier industry evidence also shows why consumer awareness is important. TerraChoice’s “Sins of Greenwashing” framework identified common forms of misleading green claims such as hidden trade-offs, vague claims, lack of proof, irrelevance, lesser-of-two-evils claims, false labels, and outright falsehoods. Its 2010 study reported that more than 95% of consumer products claiming to be green committed at least one greenwashing “sin,” showing how widespread misleading environmental communication had become in consumer markets.

A key contribution in this field is the work of Chen and Chang, who examined the relationship between greenwash and green trust. Their empirical study found that greenwashing negatively affects green trust, and that this effect is mediated through green consumer confusion and green perceived risk. In simple terms, when consumers feel that a brand’s environmental claims are exaggerated or unclear, they become confused, perceive greater risk, and reduce their trust in the brand. This finding is highly relevant to the present study because it directly links greenwashing with consumer trust.

Consumer awareness plays an important role in how greenwashing affects trust. If consumers are unaware of greenwashing tactics, they may initially accept vague terms such as “eco-friendly,” “natural,” “green,” or “sustainable” without questioning the evidence behind them. However, as awareness increases, consumers become more critical of environmental claims and demand proof through certifications, transparent reporting, and credible product information. Recent research on consumers’ ability to identify greenwashing shows that consumers often classify products based on green cues, but they may struggle to distinguish genuinely sustainable products from greenwashed ones when claims are ambiguous.

The impact of greenwashing extends beyond individual product evaluation. Research indicates that perceived greenwashing can damage brand trust, reduce purchase intention, and weaken brand loyalty. A 2025 systematic literature review of 419 peer-reviewed articles published between 2004 and 2024 found that greenwashing affects consumer trust, brand perception, corporate transparency, marketing ethics, and consumer skepticism. This suggests that greenwashing is not only harmful for one brand but may also reduce confidence in green marketing as a whole.

Studies also show that greenwashing increases consumer skepticism. When consumers repeatedly encounter misleading sustainability claims, they may begin to doubt even genuine green marketing efforts. Aji and Sutikno extended earlier work by showing that perceived greenwashing can lead to consumer skepticism, which further weakens trust in green brands. This is important because skepticism can create a long-term barrier for companies that are genuinely investing in sustainability.

Recent studies have also examined greenwashing in different sectors such as fashion, food, hospitality, FMCG, and retail. For example, research on greenwashing and brand loyalty found that the effect of greenwashing on trust and loyalty may vary across industries. Products that directly affect health, lifestyle, or personal identity may face stronger consumer reactions when greenwashing is detected. Similarly, studies in fashion and sustainable retail show that greenwashing perceptions can reduce purchase intention, especially when mediated by green skepticism.

Indian studies are also emerging in this area. Recent research on India's sustainable marketing campaigns found that misleading or exaggerated green claims increase consumer skepticism and reduce brand trust. This is particularly relevant because Indian consumers are becoming more exposed to sustainability-based advertising, but awareness of certification systems, environmental labels, and corporate sustainability reporting remains uneven. Therefore, the Indian market offers a useful context to study how awareness of greenwashing affects consumer trust.

Another important theme in the literature is transparency. Studies suggest that consumers are more likely to trust green claims when brands provide specific, verifiable, and consistent information. Third-party certifications, credible eco-labels, environmental disclosures, and clear product-level evidence can reduce confusion and strengthen trust. However, when firms rely only on emotional appeals, vague symbols, green packaging, or unsupported sustainability language, consumers may perceive the communication as manipulative.

Overall, the literature clearly establishes that greenwashing has a negative effect on consumer trust. Awareness acts as a critical factor because informed consumers are more capable of detecting misleading claims and evaluating brand credibility. However, the literature also suggests a paradox: higher awareness may protect consumers from deception, but it may also increase skepticism toward all green marketing claims. Therefore, companies must move beyond symbolic environmental advertising and adopt transparent, evidence-based, and ethically responsible green marketing practices.

### Research Gaps

Although many studies confirm that greenwashing reduces consumer trust, there is still limited research on how different levels of consumer awareness change this relationship. More studies are needed to compare consumers with low, moderate, and high greenwashing awareness.

Most existing studies focus on purchase intention and brand loyalty, while fewer studies deeply examine trust dimensions such as honesty, reliability, transparency, emotional confidence, and long-term credibility.

There is a need for more India-specific research because consumer awareness, regulatory understanding, eco-label familiarity, and trust in corporate sustainability claims may differ from Western markets.

Many studies examine greenwashing generally, but fewer compare types of greenwashing, such as vague claims, false certification, hidden trade-offs, misleading visuals, and exaggerated carbon-neutral claims.

Future research should also study whether third-party certifications, government regulations, social media exposure, and sustainability literacy can reduce the negative effect of greenwashing on consumer trust.

### III. RESEARCH OBJECTIVES

The present study is designed to systematically examine the relationship between greenwashing practices in marketing and consumer trust, with a particular focus on the role of consumer awareness. In order to achieve this purpose, the following research objectives are formulated:

1. **To examine the level of consumer awareness regarding greenwashing practices** in marketing, including their ability to identify misleading environmental claims, vague terminology, and deceptive sustainability messages.
2. **To analyze the impact of greenwashing on consumer trust**, specifically in terms of perceived credibility, transparency, and reliability of brands.
3. **To investigate the relationship between consumer awareness and trust**, determining how different levels of awareness influence consumer reactions toward green marketing claims.
4. **To identify and compare different forms of greenwashing**, such as exaggerated claims, lack of evidence, misleading labels, and hidden trade-offs, and evaluate their individual effects on consumer perception.
5. **To examine the role of consumer skepticism as an outcome of greenwashing**, and how repeated

exposure to misleading claims affects trust in both individual brands and green marketing in general.

6. **To assess the moderating effect of awareness on the relationship between greenwashing and consumer trust**, exploring whether increased awareness reduces blind trust or leads to heightened skepticism.
7. **To provide recommendations for organizations** on developing transparent, ethical, and credible green marketing strategies that can enhance consumer trust and minimize the negative impact of greenwashing.

These objectives collectively aim to bridge existing research gaps and contribute to a deeper understanding of how awareness influences the effectiveness and credibility of sustainable marketing practices.

#### IV. RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

This study adopts a structured methodological framework to examine the relationship between greenwashing practices and consumer trust, with a specific focus on the role of consumer awareness. The methodology is designed to ensure reliability, validity, and systematic analysis of the research problem.

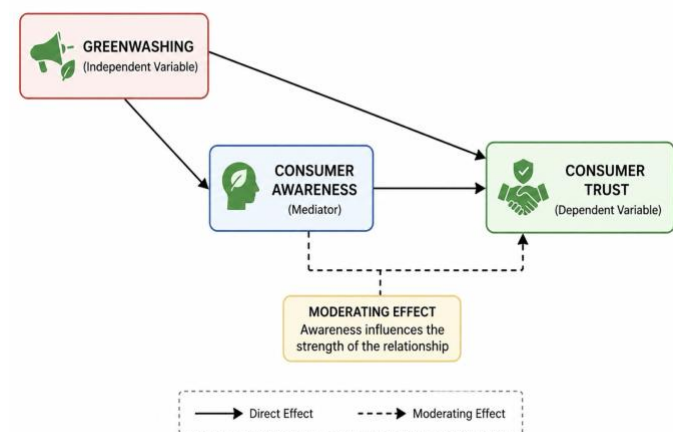


Fig. 1. Theoretical Model of Greenwashing and Its Impact on Consumer Trust

#### A. Research Design

The study follows a quantitative research design, as it aims to measure and analyze the relationship between clearly defined variables such as greenwashing perception, consumer awareness, and trust. A quantitative approach is appropriate because it allows for objective measurement, statistical testing, and generalization of findings across a broader population.

The research is descriptive and analytical in nature. It is descriptive because it seeks to understand the level of

awareness and perception of greenwashing among consumers. It is analytical because it examines the cause-and-effect relationship between greenwashing practices and consumer trust, and evaluates how awareness influences this relationship.

#### B. Data Collection

The study primarily relies on primary data collection through a structured survey method. A well-designed questionnaire is used to gather responses from consumers regarding their awareness of greenwashing, perception of environmental claims, and level of trust in green products and brands.

The questionnaire consists of close-ended questions using a Likert scale (e.g., 1 = strongly disagree to 5 = strongly agree) to measure attitudes and perceptions. The survey is distributed through online platforms such as Google Forms and social media channels to ensure wider reach and accessibility.

In addition to primary data, secondary data is also utilized to support the research. This includes published research papers, journals, reports, and credible online sources related to green marketing, consumer behavior, and sustainability practices. Secondary data helps in building theoretical understanding and validating the findings of the study.

#### C. Sampling Technique

The study uses a non-probability sampling method, specifically convenience sampling, due to ease of access and time constraints. Respondents are selected based on their availability and willingness to participate in the survey.

The sample size for the study is approximately 150–200 respondents, representing a diverse group of consumers from different age groups, educational backgrounds, and income levels. This range is considered sufficient for conducting statistical analysis and identifying meaningful patterns in consumer behavior.

The target population includes urban and semi-urban consumers, as they are more exposed to green marketing practices and sustainability-related communication.

#### D. Tools and Techniques

To analyze the collected data, various statistical tools and techniques are employed to ensure accurate interpretation of results:

- **Descriptive Statistics:** Used to summarize demographic data and general trends in awareness and perception (mean, percentage, standard deviation).

- **Correlation Analysis:** Applied to examine the relationship between greenwashing perception, consumer awareness, and trust.
- **Regression Analysis:** Used to determine the impact of independent variables (greenwashing, awareness) on the dependent variable (consumer trust).
- **Reliability Test (Cronbach’s Alpha):** Conducted to assess the internal consistency of the questionnaire.
- **Statistical Software:** Tools such as SPSS and Microsoft Excel are used for data analysis, visualization, and interpretation.

These techniques help in identifying patterns, testing hypotheses, and drawing meaningful conclusions about how greenwashing influences consumer trust and how awareness moderates this relationship.

V. HYPOTHESIS DEVELOPMENT

Based on the conceptual framework and existing theoretical insights, the following hypotheses are formulated:

**H1:** Greenwashing has a significant negative impact on consumer trust. This hypothesis assumes that misleading environmental claims reduce the credibility and reliability of brands in the eyes of consumers.

**H2:** Greenwashing has a significant positive relationship with consumer awareness. Frequent exposure to green marketing practices, including misleading ones, may enhance consumers’ ability to identify and understand greenwashing over time.

**H3:** Consumer awareness has a significant impact on consumer trust. Higher awareness levels are expected to influence how consumers evaluate brand claims, either strengthening trust in authentic brands or increasing skepticism toward doubtful ones.

**H4:** Consumer awareness moderates the relationship between greenwashing and consumer trust. The negative effect of greenwashing on trust is expected to be stronger among highly aware consumers compared to those with lower awareness levels.

**H5:** Different forms of greenwashing have varying effects on consumer trust. Certain practices, such as false certifications or lack of evidence, may have a stronger negative impact on trust than vague or ambiguous claims.

**H6:** Consumer skepticism mediates the relationship between greenwashing and consumer trust. Greenwashing may increase skepticism, which in turn reduces trust in brands and their environmental claims.

VI. DATA ANALYSIS AND RESULTS

The data collected through the survey were analyzed using statistical techniques to examine demographic characteristics, levels of awareness regarding greenwashing, and its impact on consumer trust. The analysis also includes correlation and regression results to validate the proposed hypotheses.

1. Demographic Analysis

A total of **180 valid responses** were considered for analysis. The demographic profile of respondents is summarized below:

**Table 1: Demographic Profile of Respondents**

Variable	Category	Frequency	Percentage (%)
Gender	Male	102	56.7
	Female	78	43.3
Age Group	18–25 years	72	40.0
	26–35 years	58	32.2
	36–45 years	30	16.7
	Above 45	20	11.1
Education	Undergraduate	64	35.6
	Postgraduate	86	47.8
	Others	30	16.6
Monthly Income	Below ₹25,000	48	26.7
	₹25,000–₹50,000	62	34.4
	Above ₹50,000	70	38.9

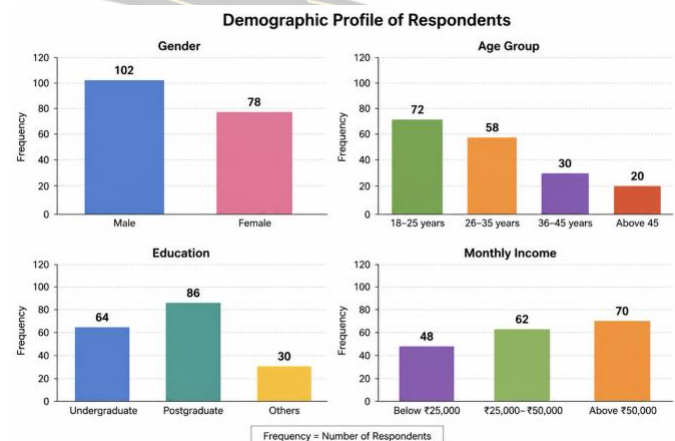


Fig. 2. Demographic Profile of Respondents

**Interpretation:**

The sample mainly consists of young and educated respondents, indicating a population more exposed to sustainability communication and digital marketing. This demographic profile is suitable for studying awareness and perception of greenwashing.

**2. Awareness Level Findings**

Consumer awareness regarding greenwashing was measured using Likert-scale statements. The results are summarized below:

**Table 2: Awareness of Greenwashing**

Statement	Mean Score	Interpretation
I am aware of environmental marketing claims	3.98	High awareness
I can identify misleading green claims	3.62	Moderate awareness
I check for certifications before purchase	3.45	Moderate awareness
I trust eco-labels without verification	2.88	Low trust
I believe companies exaggerate green claims	4.12	High agreement

**Interpretation:**

The findings indicate that respondents possess **moderate to high awareness** of greenwashing practices. While many consumers recognize exaggerated claims, fewer actively verify certifications, suggesting a gap between awareness and action.

**3. Impact on Consumer Trust**

Consumer trust was assessed across dimensions such as credibility, transparency, and reliability.

**Table 3: Consumer Trust Levels**

Statement	Mean Score	Interpretation
I trust brands that promote sustainability	3.54	Moderate trust
Green claims influence my purchase decision	3.71	Moderate influence
I doubt environmental claims by companies	4.05	High skepticism
I trust only certified eco-friendly products	3.82	High preference

**Interpretation:**

The results suggest that while consumers are influenced by green marketing, **trust is conditional and cautious**. Increased skepticism indicates that greenwashing negatively affects confidence in brand claims.

**4. Correlation Analysis**

Correlation analysis was conducted to examine relationships among variables.

**Table 4: Correlation Matrix**

Variables	Greenwashing	Awareness	Trust
Greenwashing	1	0.41	-0.58
Awareness	0.41	1	-0.32
Trust	-0.58	-0.32	1

**Interpretation:**

- Greenwashing shows a **strong negative correlation with trust (-0.58)**, supporting the idea that misleading claims reduce consumer confidence.
- Awareness has a **moderate negative relationship with trust (-0.32)**, indicating that more aware consumers tend to be more skeptical.
- A positive correlation between greenwashing and awareness (0.41) suggests that exposure increases recognition of such practices.

**5. Regression Analysis**

A multiple regression analysis was conducted to assess the impact of greenwashing and awareness on consumer trust.

**Table 5: Regression Results**

Variable	Beta Coefficient (β)	t-value	Significance (p-value)
Greenwashing	-0.52	-7.21	0.000
Awareness	-0.28	-3.95	0.001
R <sup>2</sup> = 0.46			

**Interpretation:**

- Greenwashing has a **significant negative impact on consumer trust**, confirming H1.
- Awareness also negatively affects trust, suggesting increased skepticism among informed consumers.

- The model explains **46% of the variation in consumer trust**, indicating a strong explanatory power.

## VII. DISCUSSION

### 1. Interpretation of Results

The findings of this study provide clear evidence that greenwashing has a substantial and negative influence on consumer trust. The regression results indicate that as the perception of misleading environmental claims increases, trust in brands declines significantly. This aligns with the idea that trust is built on credibility and transparency; once consumers suspect exaggeration or deception, their confidence weakens not only toward a specific product but also toward the brand as a whole.

Another important insight is the role of consumer awareness. The results show that awareness is moderately high among respondents, particularly in recognizing exaggerated claims. However, the behavioral aspect—such as verifying certifications—remains relatively weaker. This suggests a gap between **cognitive awareness (knowing)** and **behavioral action (doing)**. Consumers may understand greenwashing conceptually, but they do not always act on that knowledge during purchase decisions.

Interestingly, awareness also demonstrates a negative relationship with trust. This does not imply that awareness is harmful; rather, it indicates that more informed consumers tend to be more cautious and critical. As awareness increases, blind trust decreases, and skepticism becomes more prominent. This dual effect highlights that awareness acts both as a protective mechanism against deception and as a factor that raises the threshold for trust.

Furthermore, the correlation results suggest that repeated exposure to greenwashing contributes to increased recognition of such practices. Over time, consumers learn to identify misleading patterns, which reinforces skepticism. This creates a challenging environment for marketers, where even genuine sustainability efforts may be questioned if not communicated clearly and transparently.

### 2. Comparison with Previous Studies

The results of this study are consistent with earlier research in the field of green marketing and consumer behavior. Prior studies have established that greenwashing leads to reduced consumer trust by increasing perceived risk and confusion. The strong negative relationship observed in this study reinforces those findings and confirms that misleading environmental

communication continues to be a major barrier to trust formation.

The observed role of awareness also aligns with existing literature suggesting that informed consumers are better equipped to evaluate marketing claims. However, this study extends previous research by highlighting that increased awareness does not automatically lead to higher trust; instead, it may intensify skepticism. This finding supports earlier arguments that excessive exposure to misleading claims can erode overall confidence in green marketing.

Additionally, the finding that consumers prefer certified and verifiable claims is consistent with prior research emphasizing the importance of credibility signals such as eco-labels and third-party certifications. However, the moderate level of verification behavior observed in this study indicates that while consumers value such signals, they do not always actively seek or evaluate them.

Compared to global studies, the results also reflect characteristics specific to emerging markets. In contexts like India, where sustainability awareness is growing but still uneven, consumers may simultaneously exhibit trust in green claims and skepticism toward their authenticity. This mixed response highlights the transitional stage of consumer understanding in such markets.

### 3. Implications for Marketers and Consumers

#### Implications for Marketers

The findings suggest that organizations must move beyond superficial environmental messaging and focus on **authentic, transparent, and evidence-based communication**. Vague terms such as “eco-friendly” or “natural” without supporting proof are likely to reduce trust rather than enhance it.

Marketers should prioritize:

- Clear and specific environmental claims supported by data
- Use of credible third-party certifications and standardized eco-labels
- Consistent communication across all marketing channels
- Transparency in production processes and sustainability reporting

In addition, companies need to recognize that modern consumers are increasingly aware and critical. Building trust requires long-term commitment rather than short-term promotional tactics. Ethical marketing practices and genuine

sustainability initiatives can serve as competitive advantages in this environment.

### Implications for Consumers

From the consumer perspective, the study highlights the importance of **active evaluation of green claims**. Awareness alone is not sufficient; consumers must also develop the habit of verifying information, checking certifications, and seeking reliable sources before making purchase decisions.

Consumers should:

- Be cautious of vague or overly broad environmental claims
- Look for recognized certifications and detailed product information
- Compare multiple sources before forming opinions
- Develop sustainability literacy to make informed choices

### VIII. CONCLUSION

The study highlights that green marketing, while essential for promoting sustainability, faces serious credibility challenges due to the growing prevalence of greenwashing. The findings clearly demonstrate that misleading or exaggerated environmental claims significantly weaken consumer trust, which is a critical factor influencing purchase decisions and long-term brand relationships. As consumers become more exposed to sustainability messaging, they develop a higher level of awareness, enabling them to identify inconsistencies and question the authenticity of green claims.

An important insight from this research is the dual role of consumer awareness. On one hand, awareness acts as a protective mechanism by helping consumers recognize deceptive practices. On the other hand, it also increases skepticism, making consumers more cautious and less likely to trust environmental claims without verification. This creates a

challenging environment for marketers, where trust is not easily earned and requires consistent, transparent, and evidence-based communication.

The study also reveals that not all green marketing efforts are perceived equally. Consumers show greater confidence in brands that provide clear information, credible certifications, and verifiable evidence of sustainability. In contrast, vague terminology and unsupported claims tend to reduce trust and may even damage the overall perception of green marketing. This indicates that authenticity and transparency are key determinants of successful sustainable marketing strategies.

From a broader perspective, the research emphasizes the need for stronger regulatory frameworks and standardized guidelines to control misleading environmental claims. At the same time, consumers must play an active role by critically evaluating information and making informed choices. A collaborative approach involving businesses, policymakers, and consumers is necessary to ensure that green marketing contributes meaningfully to environmental sustainability rather than becoming a tool for superficial promotion.

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