

## THE GREENWASHING PHENOMENON IN MARKETING COMMUNICATIONS AND ITS IMPACT ON CONSUMER CYNICISM

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### Abstract

Rising environmental awareness has fueled a surge in green marketing campaigns. Unfortunately, corporations often exploit this opportunity to engage in greenwashing, a misleading marketing communication practice involving sustainability claims. This study aims to examine the phenomenon of greenwashing in depth and analyze its impact on consumer cynicism. Using qualitative methods with a literature review approach, this study collected and analyzed various academic sources, journals, and related documents. The results show that greenwashing tactics manifested through vague claims, the exploitation of visual elements, and the concealment of ecological facts constitute a failure of communication ethics that triggers severe cognitive dissonance in consumers. The accumulation of this sense of betrayal crystallizes into chronic consumer cynicism, a form of deep distrust of the social motives of all corporations. The destructive impact of this cynicism creates a domino effect that undermines the entire green market ecosystem, as consumers tend to generalize and reject honest claims from truly sustainable companies. These findings underscore the importance of implementing radical transparency by corporations and the urgency of strict legal regulatory intervention by governments to break the chain of market distrust.

**Keywords:** *Greenwashing, Marketing Communication, Consumer Cynicism, Literature Review, Business Ethics.*

### A. INTRODUCTION

Global public awareness of environmental issues has increased significantly over the past decade. Climate change, plastic pollution, and ecosystem damage have triggered collective anxiety that has transformed consumer behavior (Zulfikar et al., 2023). Modern consumers no longer consider only the price and functionality of a product, but also the ethical value and ecological impact of its production process. This paradigm shift has given rise to a new market segment called green consumers, a group of consumers who actively choose to support brands committed to sustainability (Utami, 2020).

In response to increasingly environmentally conscious market demands, the corporate sector has flocked to adopt green marketing strategies. This practice has not only become an instrument for environmental preservation but has also transformed into a highly competitive market differentiation strategy (Situmorang, 2011). Companies utilize green marketing communications to build a positive brand image, enhance their reputation, and attract the loyalty of eco-friendly consumers. Through narratives of organic products, recycled packaging, and carbon emission reduction campaigns, marketing communications are now filled with eco-friendly claims to secure market position (Qurniawati, 2018).

However, behind this massive green marketing trend, a phenomenon has emerged that blurs the line between genuine commitment and market exploitation, known as greenwashing. The practice of greenwashing is a misleading marketing communication practice in which companies deliberately construct an exaggerated, inaccurate, or even outright false image of environmental friendliness (Indrayana, 2024). Companies spend more time and money advertising themselves as "green" than actually implementing sustainable business practices.

This creates a distortion of information that is detrimental to the public and the ecosystem (Gutom & Sakti, 2023).

Marketing communication tactics in greenwashing have become highly subtle and manipulative. Many companies use natural-themed visual elements, such as the color green and leaf symbols, as well as vague terms like "eco-friendly," "natural," or "sustainable" without any certification or valid scientific evidence. (Aryoso & Sakti, 2023) Furthermore, companies tend to emphasize a small, environmentally friendly attribute of their products while concealing the much larger environmental impact of their overall operations. The complexity of these tactics makes it difficult for ordinary consumers to distinguish between honest claims and mere image manipulation (Abd Rahum et al., 2019).

When this information manipulation begins to be identified by the public, the impact not only damages the reputation of a single company but also permeates the broader consumer psychology. Repeated exposure to false claims triggers consumer cynicism (Zubaidi, 2018). This cynicism is a form of deep distrust, chronic skepticism, and negative perception of the motives behind all social or environmental campaigns undertaken by corporations. Consumers feel betrayed and exploited, leading them to distrust information presented in advertisements (Suciati, 2019).

The impact of this consumer cynicism is highly destructive to the sustainable business ecosystem as a whole. When cynicism takes root, consumers tend to generalize all companies and reject environmentally friendly claims, even those made by companies that genuinely practice green practices (Chylinski & Chu, 2010). This phenomenon creates a toxic market climate, where companies' motivation to innovate and create environmentally friendly products is diminished due to a loss of market trust. Consequently, collective efforts to mitigate environmental damage through global trade are hampered by a thick wall of mistrust (Helm et al., 2015).

Against this backdrop, this study focuses on a radical examination of the "Greenwashing Phenomenon in Marketing Communications and Its Impact on Consumer Cynicism." This research is expected to provide theoretical contributions to the development of marketing communications and consumer behavior, particularly in the context of business ethics. Practically, this study is also expected to serve as a critical reference for industry players in evaluating their communication strategies and as a consideration for regulators in formulating stricter policies to protect consumers' rights from the manipulation of green information.

## **B. METHOD**

This research uses a qualitative approach with a literature review to in-depth explore contemporary concepts, theories, and phenomena regarding the impact of greenwashing in marketing communications on consumer cynicism. The data used are entirely secondary data from reputable scientific literature, such as national and international journals, textbooks, and official scientific reports published within the last ten years. Data collection was conducted through online database searches in repositories such as Google Scholar, Scopus, ScienceDirect, and Garuda, using a combination of specific keywords and Boolean operators to ensure the relevance of the sources obtained.

After the literature meeting the inclusion criteria was collected, the data were systematically analyzed using content analysis and qualitative thematic analysis. The analysis stages included data reduction to filter out important information, categorizing findings into specific thematic clusters (such as greenwashing tactics and consumer psychological mechanisms), and theoretical synthesis that confronted the various findings using consumer behavior theory to draw final conclusions. To ensure the validity of the data (trustworthiness) and minimize the researcher's subjective bias, this study applies the data source triangulation

technique by comparing the perspectives of various authors, journals, and different industrial contexts.

### C. RESULT AND DISCUSSION

The phenomenon of greenwashing in modern marketing communications has evolved from simply exaggerated advertising claims to a highly sophisticated image manipulation strategy. Based on an analysis of various literature, greenwashing is defined as a deliberate act by companies to mislead consumers about the environmental practices or ecological benefits of their products and services. Companies exploit information asymmetry, where they have more in-depth knowledge of commodity production processes than consumers. As a result, marketing communications no longer function as a bridge to honest information, but rather as a filtering tool that only presents an artificially positive perspective and hides the reality of environmental damage occurring behind the scenes of production.

Literature research shows that greenwashing tactics can be mapped into several specific typologies of information manipulation. The first tactic most frequently encountered is the use of vague claims such as "eco-friendly," "natural," or "green" without clear operational definitions or third-party certification. The second tactic is weak substantiation, where sustainability claims are included on product packaging without providing access to information or scientific evidence that consumers can verify. These tactics are designed to exploit consumers' shallow understanding of environmental technical terms, creating a falsely positive perception without any real corporate commitment.

In addition to textual manipulation, greenwashing marketing communications rely heavily on the exploitation of visual and sensory elements in advertising and packaging design. Literature analysis confirms that the use of the color green and natural imagery such as forests, leaves, water droplets, and wildlife psychologically induces the perception that the product is safe for the ecosystem. These visual stimuli operate at a subconscious level, triggering automatic associations with cleanliness and environmental sustainability, even before consumers read the actual product ingredients or specifications. This visual exploitation serves as an effective shield to distract consumers from the negative ecological impacts of the company's industrial operations.

Academic literature also identifies a tactic known as the "hidden trade-off," where companies highlight one small eco-friendly attribute while ignoring a much larger environmental impact. For example, a paper product might be advertised as coming from sustainably harvested forests, but the bleaching process still uses harmful chemicals that pollute local water sources. This type of marketing manipulates consumers' attention, making them feel they are making a positive contribution to the planet, when in fact, the cumulative ecological footprint of the product's life cycle remains destructive.

Another form of deception frequently found in literature reviews is the inclusion of sustainability claims that are actually irrelevant to the product's essence or applicable legal regulations. One classic example is emphasizing claims that a product is free from certain chemicals that have long been completely banned by international law. By framing mandatory legal compliance as voluntary environmental stewardship, companies attempt to gain reputational points in the public eye. This logical fallacy exploits consumers' ignorance of industry regulations and creates false market differentiation that disadvantages honest competitors.

The root of this widespread misleading marketing communication is the economic motive to capture a premium market niche. Consumers with a high ecological awareness are generally willing to pay a higher price (a green premium) for products proven to be environmentally friendly. This opportunity for significant financial gain encourages many corporations to take shortcuts by using cosmetic marketing rather than making significant

investments to restructure their production systems to be truly sustainable. Marketing communications are ultimately reduced to a cosmetic propaganda tool aimed at maximizing short-term profitability at the expense of business ethics.

To understand how consumers respond to these manipulative communication strategies, various literatures utilize consumer behavior theory. One of the most relevant theories is Attribution Theory by Kelley & Michela (1980), which explains how humans attempt to interpret the motives behind the actions of others or entities. When consumers are exposed to green advertising, they cognitively evaluate whether the company is acting out of intrinsic motives, namely genuine concern for the earth, or extrinsic motives, namely merely seeking economic gain. This evaluation of motives determines the direction of subsequent consumer attitudes.

In addition to Attribution Theory, Signaling Theory by Connelly et al. (2011) also provides a strong foundation for analyzing this phenomenon. In a market full of uncertainty, green claims in marketing communications serve as signals of a brand's quality and ethical values to consumers. Credible signals are typically supported by rigorous independent certification and publicly accessible information transparency. However, when companies send false signals through greenwashing, market distortions occur that blur the line between high- and low-quality signals. This signal failure triggers a collapse in the trust system within the green product market.

A literature review reveals a clear yet persistent conceptual distinction between consumer skepticism and consumer cynicism. Skepticism is viewed as a temporary state of doubt oriented toward seeking stronger scientific evidence before believing a marketing claim. In contrast, consumer cynicism is a more acute and permanent phase. Cynicism is no longer simply a doubt about advertising content, but rather a deep-seated belief that all companies have ulterior motives that are selfish, manipulative, and never truly concerned about the well-being of the environment or society.

Consumer cynicism has pathological characteristics that manifest in a chronic distrust of corporate institutions. Consumers with high levels of cynicism will adopt a negative confirmation bias, where they automatically reject and deride any social or environmental initiative launched by any brand. They view corporate sustainability campaigns as modern hypocrisy and public relations stunts designed to mask capitalist greed. This cynicism transforms the relationship between consumers and producers into one filled with constant suspicion.

The formation of consumer cynicism does not occur instantly, but rather through an accumulated process of experiences of profound disappointment resulting from exposed corporate lies. When consumers with strong environmental commitments realize that the products they purchased at high prices contribute to pollution, they experience intense cognitive dissonance. Guilt from feeling deceived and contributing to ecological damage turns into collective anger. This psychologically traumatic experience destroys consumers' positive expectations and replaces them with a defensive shield of cynicism.

The dynamics of digital communication and the presence of social media in the modern era have accelerated and expanded consumer cynicism toward greenwashing practices. When a multinational brand's false green claims are exposed, the information can spread virally within hours through investigative videos, critical infographics, and digital boycotts. This digital space facilitates the formation of consumer communities that share negative sentiments and suspicions about corporations. This mass amplification on social media reduces geographic distance, allowing a greenwashing scandal in one country to instantly trigger consumer cynicism in other parts of the world.

A thorough analysis of consumer psychology literature reveals that the effects of greenwashing are equivalent to feelings of betrayal in interpersonal relationships (brand

betrayal). The relationship between eco-friendly consumers and a brand is often built on shared spiritual values and moral ethics. When companies are found to have manipulated green information, consumers not only feel financially disadvantaged but also feel their moral values have been violated for the sake of business profits. This emotional betrayal leaves psychological wounds that are very difficult to heal, causing consumers to close the door on reconciliation with the brand.

The immediate impact of widespread consumer cynicism is a drastic decline in brand equity and overall company value. Consumer trust that has taken decades to build can collapse in an instant due to a single scandal involving dishonest environmental information. Cynicism leads to a collapse in consumer loyalty, a decline in sales volume, and a loss of positive word-of-mouth recommendations. Conversely, brands caught in a cycle of public cynicism become the target of constant criticism, ultimately reducing their market value and investment attractiveness to global investors.

The most worrying negative externality of consumer cynicism is the generalization effect that undermines the entire green market ecosystem. Cynic consumers tend to lose the ability to differentiate between companies engaging in greenwashing and those genuinely practicing sustainable business practices. This pervasive skepticism creates market conditions that are unfavorable for genuine green innovation. Companies that have invested significant capital in transforming their supply chains to be environmentally friendly risk failure in the marketplace as their claims are dismissed as marketing lies by a cynical public.

When the market climate is saturated with mass cynicism, the motivation of industrial sectors to shift to environmentally friendly operational practices risks a drastic decline. Businesses will see that significant investments in low-emission technologies or biodegradable packaging no longer receive the appreciation or commensurate economic returns from suspicious consumers. As a result, instead of racing to decarbonization and environmental conservation, corporations could potentially revert to conventional, exploitative, yet low-cost business practices. This situation represents a major setback for the global sustainable development agenda.

In practical terms, consumer cynicism caused by greenwashing manifests itself in active resistance that is detrimental to business continuity. Cynical consumers not only stop purchasing products from problematic brands but also actively organize boycott movements, both locally and internationally. They transform into consumer activists, spreading negative reviews on various digital platforms and educating their social circles to avoid those products. This active resistance creates direct economic pressure that forces corporations to face the real financial consequences of their dishonest marketing communications.

Facing the complex impacts of greenwashing, various literature confirms that voluntary business ethics approaches from corporations are no longer sufficient. Strict and binding legal regulatory intervention from governments, as market regulators, is needed to protect consumers and the business ecosystem. The government must formulate a standard definition for environmentally friendly claims, prohibit the use of vague terms without evidence, and require certification from an accredited independent institution before a product can be marketed with a green label. Strict law enforcement accompanied by severe financial penalties will force corporations to reconsider their attempts to manipulate information.

For corporations seeking to survive in a market landscape filled with cynical consumers, the literature offers a solution in the form of radical transparency. Companies must boldly disclose all information about their supply chains to the public, from the origin of raw materials, energy consumption, waste management, to the carbon footprint generated during the distribution process. Modern technologies such as blockchain can be integrated to track and verify environmental claims in real time for consumers. Only through total transparency and real accountability can companies break down the walls of cynicism and rebuild market trust.

Environmental non-governmental organizations (NGOs) and the academic community also play a crucial role as independent watchdogs in curbing the phenomenon of greenwashing. Through investigative research and objective scientific publications, researchers and activists can uncover the manipulation of marketing communications by large corporations. Consistent public education on how to detect greenwashing tactics will increase environmental literacy. An informed and critical public will automatically act as a natural filter, rejecting products that are engineered to portray a green image.

From an academic perspective, these literature findings underscore the need to reconceptualize marketing education curricula in higher education institutions. Marketing education should no longer solely focus on persuasion techniques, perception manipulation, and maximizing sales by any means necessary. The dimensions of business ethics, social responsibility, and eco-literacy must be integrated as key pillars in developing future marketing managers. A thorough understanding of the long-term dangers of greenwashing is expected to produce a new generation of marketing practitioners who prioritize honest communication as a top strategic value.

The process of rebuilding relationships between cynical consumers and the corporate sector requires a long time and a strong commitment. Companies must recognize that green marketing communications are not merely a complementary public relations tool to quell criticism, but rather an honest reflection of the transformation of their sustainable business models. When companies can demonstrate alignment between the narratives they convey in the public sphere and concrete actions on the ground, consumer cynicism will gradually erode and be replaced by a harmonious strategic partnership for the preservation of the earth.

The researchers acknowledge that this qualitative literature study has certain limitations that must be considered when interpreting the results. Because this research relies entirely on secondary data from previous scientific articles, the rapidly changing dynamics of consumer behavior in the field may not be fully documented in the analyzed literature. Furthermore, cultural variations, environmental literacy levels, and regulatory landscapes in each country may influence the intensity of consumer cynicism that forms, a matter that requires further empirical exploration to obtain specific mapping by geographic region.

As a final conclusion to this discussion, a common thread can be drawn: the phenomenon of greenwashing is a form of ethical failure in marketing communications that triggers a destructive chain reaction. The consistent manipulation of information, exploitation of visual elements, and false claims made by corporations will crash into the increasingly critical consciousness of modern consumers. This collision results in a profound psychological explosion of disappointment, which in turn crystallizes into chronic consumer cynicism. This cynicism then backfires, destroying the reputations of the corporations involved, damaging the entire green product market, and hindering the environmental conservation agenda.

#### **D. CONCLUSION**

This study concludes that the phenomenon of greenwashing in modern marketing communications represents a structural failure of business ethics. This practice exploits information asymmetry through visual manipulation, vague claims, and the concealment of detrimental ecological facts. When such false information is identified by the public, the impact goes far beyond financial losses. This manipulation triggers cognitive dissonance and a deep sense of betrayal in consumers. The accumulation of this psychological disappointment ultimately crystallizes into chronic consumer cynicism. This cynicism is characterized by a general distrust of all forms of environmental initiatives undertaken by the corporate sector. Furthermore, consumer cynicism creates a destructive domino effect for the entire eco-friendly product market ecosystem. Cynical consumers tend to generalize negative reviews, thus rejecting claims from companies that genuinely implement sustainable business practices

honestly. This systemic impact not only destroys brand equity and loyalty to the companies involved but also reduces the industrial sector's motivation to innovate in green technology due to the loss of market trust. Therefore, to break this chain of cynicism, strict legal regulatory intervention by the government to standardize green claims is necessary. At the same time, the corporate sector is obliged to implement radical transparency in its marketing communications in order to rebuild a healthy and accountable market climate.

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