



Greenwashing versus Genuine Sustainability: Consumer Responses to ESG Marketing Strategies

Dr. Sazina Khan¹, Dr. Roshan Anant Gangurde²

Designation: Faculty and Senior Outreach Manager¹, Faculty²

Orcid No: 0009-0005-5039-0099¹, 0000-002-3142-8224²

Institution: Westford University College, Sharjah¹²

Department: Academic Department¹²

<https://doi.org/10.5281/zenodo.21271931>

Abstract

This systematic literature review addresses consumer differentiation between greenwashing and sustainability in ESG marketing. Integrating studies on greenwashing, sustainability communication, consumer trust, green scepticism, purchase intention and corporate accountability, the review draws upon signaling theory, attribution theory, persuasion knowledge, stakeholder theory and legitimacy theory to reveal six mechanisms of consumer response: claim specificity, evidence visibility, source credibility, perceived corporate motive, consumer environmental literacy and institutional accountability. ESG marketing builds trust through claims which are specific, proportionate, credible and matched with firm performance. On the other hand, greenwashing provokes scepticism, uncertainty, moral backlash, reduced purchase intention and negative spillover effects on the company as a whole and on unrelated products. A Consumer Trust-Accountability Framework is developed to connect consumer psychology with corporate governance and guide managers in ethical ESG marketing.

Keywords: *Greenwashing; ESG Marketing; Consumer Trust; Sustainability Communication; Green Scepticism; Systematic Literature Review*

1. Introduction

The language of ESG entered advertising, packaging, social media and stories told by brands. More companies now use statements such as green, ethical, sustainable, carbon neutral, conscious or planet positive to convey their responsibility. However, at the moment of purchase consumers cannot check the amount of emissions in the supply chain, working conditions, the level of recyclability or governance quality. Thus, consumers have to rely on claims, labels, certifications, brand reputation and third-party validation. Such information asymmetry makes sustainability marketing so valuable, yet it makes consumers vulnerable to greenwashing (Chen and Chang 2013; Lyon and Montgomery 2015; Seele and Gatti 2017).



Greenwashing is an exaggeration, concealment or misrepresentation of environmental and social performance by the communication made. As far as consumer markets are concerned, the consequences of greenwashing extend beyond false advertisement because greenwashing erodes trust in sustainable consumption, penalizes those who actually invest in ESG performance and fosters market cynicism (de Freitas Netto et al. 2020; Szabo and Webster 2021). The critical question then becomes not only about persuasive claims, but about accountability.

Thus, this review asks: how do consumers react to greenwashing and sustainability claims in ESG marketing and what makes sustainability communication credible? The contributions of this paper are twofold – it provides conceptual synthesis of the existing research findings and offers a Consumer Trust-Accountability Framework as the basis for future research and managerial implications.

2. Conceptual and theoretical foundations

Greenwashing should be considered as a communication-performance mismatch. The list of the techniques that can be used for greenwashing includes ambiguous language, limited transparency, hidden tradeoffs, self-made labels, future-oriented promises and claims implying greater sustainability achievement than provided by evidence (Delmas and Burbano 2011; de Jong et al. 2018). Sustainability communication, on the contrary, is performance-based, evidence-based and proportionate. Claim regarding improvements at the level of one product should not make consumers believe that the entire brand or company is sustainable.

Five theories provide explanation of consumer reactions. Signaling theory is useful in explaining how ESG claims are the signals that firms send when sustainability performance is difficult to assess (Connelly et al. 2011). Attribution theory is relevant for the explanation of how consumers perceive corporate motives differentiating the intrinsic motivation and reputation repair strategy (Forehand and Grier 2003; Du et al. 2010). The persuasion knowledge model is used to explain consumer skepticism based on recognition of persuasive intent (Friestad and Wright 1994).

Table 1. Theoretical lenses used in the review

Theory	Core logic	Relevance to ESG marketing and consumer response
Signaling theory	Consumers rely on cues when sustainability performance is difficult to verify.	Specific and verified claims increase trust; vague claims increase scepticism.
Attribution theory	Consumers infer whether motives are intrinsic, extrinsic or opportunistic.	Genuine motives strengthen trust; opportunism creates moral backlash.
Persuasion knowledge model	Consumers resist messages when they recognise manipulative intent.	Overly polished ESG claims can trigger scepticism.



Stakeholder theory	Consumers reward, contest and circulate sustainability meanings.	Consumer response affects reputation, advocacy and accountability.
Legitimacy theory	Firms communicate ESG commitments to meet social expectations.	Greenwashing threatens legitimacy when symbolism replaces performance.

3. Methodology

Systematic review of literature along with qualitative thematic synthesis was used due to the fragmented nature of studies conducted on the topics of greenwashing and ESG marketing, which span the fields of marketing, corporate social responsibility (CSR), environmental management, consumer psychology, and communications. PRISMA principles of literature identification, screening, eligibility, and inclusion were adopted for conducting the review (Page et al., 2021; Tranfield et al., 2003). Effect size was not a goal of this study.

Table 2. Review protocol

Protocol element	Specification
Review design	Systematic literature review with qualitative thematic synthesis.
Databases	Scopus, Web of Science, Business Source Complete, ScienceDirect and publisher checks.
Search period	2000-2026, with recent work prioritised and foundational theory retained.
Document types	Peer-reviewed articles and selected scholarly reviews.
Language	English.
Core concepts	Greenwashing, ESG marketing, sustainability claims, consumer trust, scepticism and purchase intention.
Analysis	Deductive-inductive coding around credibility, motive, evidence, literacy and accountability.

Table 3. Inclusion and exclusion criteria

Criterion type	Included	Excluded
Topical relevance	Studies on greenwashing, genuine sustainability, ESG/CSR marketing and sustainability claims.	General advertising without sustainability relevance.
Consumer response	Trust, scepticism, purchase intention, loyalty, advocacy, resistance, confusion or backlash.	Investor-only or internal-reporting studies unless consumer relevance was explicit.
Evidence type	Empirical, conceptual and review studies with clear contribution.	Opinion pieces, blogs and purely descriptive sources.



Quality	Transparent framing, research design or review method.	Duplicated, inaccessible or methodologically weak records.
---------	--	--

Table 4. PRISMA-informed screening log

PRISMA stage	Number of records/articles	Decision basis
Records identified from databases	1,124	Scopus, Web of Science, Business Source Complete, ScienceDirect and publisher checks.
Duplicate records removed	286	Removed through title, DOI and author-year matching.
Records screened	838	Screened against ESG marketing and consumer response criteria.
Records excluded	661	Excluded for weak relevance, non-consumer focus or non-scholarly type.
Full texts assessed	177	Assessed for conceptual fit, empirical quality and relevance.
Full texts excluded	109	Excluded for no consumer focus, weak construct fit or insufficient transparency.
Studies included	68	Included in qualitative thematic synthesis and framework development.

The extraction process included theory, method, country, claim type, evidence cue, consumer response, and managerial implication.

4. Thematic synthesis

Six topics are relevant for explaining consumer interpretation. First, claim specificity is essential. Consumers are more receptive when businesses specify changes, boundaries, measurements, and the source of the evidence. Ambiguous terms, like eco-friendly or conscious, tend to raise consumers' doubts because they allow consumers to draw wide interpretations without concrete evidence (Schmuck et al. 2018; Szabo and Webster 2021).

Second, visibility of evidence influences the perception of credibility. Metrics, lifecycle information, traceability and third-party certification decrease risks for consumers. Eco-labeling helps only if consumers know and believe in the labeler; otherwise, the labelers are viewed as weak (Atkinson and Rosenthal 2014). Third, motive perceptions affect consumers' attitude toward claims. Consumers can forgive business benefits in exchange for credible ESG performance, but they will have negative attitudes if they perceive sustainability as reputation repairing or morality opportunism (Du et al. 2010).

Fourth, greenwashing leads to scepticism, confusion, and resistance. Scepticism acts as protection from manipulation by the firm, while confusion reduces consumer abilities to differentiate between certified and symbolic claims. Resistance can be expressed through avoidance, lower willingness to pay, negative word-of-



mouth, social media complaints, or even boycotts (Chen and Chang 2013; Nguyen et al. 2019). Fifth, credible ESG system – governance, targets, assurance, reporting, traceability, and stakeholders engagement – is necessary for authentic marketing. Sixth, greenwashing generates spillovers. One misleading claim can undermine trust in not only a particular brand or product category, but also in sustainability labels.

Table 5. Thematic synthesis of consumer response pathways

Theme	Greenwashing pathway	Genuine sustainability pathway	Likely consumer response
Claim specificity	Vague or symbolic claims create ambiguity.	Specific and measurable claims clarify meaning.	Scepticism or trust depending on clarity.
Evidence visibility	Unsupported or self-declared claims appear weak.	Third-party evidence supports credibility.	Higher trust and purchase confidence.
Corporate motive	Claims appear opportunistic or image-driven.	Claims reflect values and long-term commitment.	Moral backlash or support.
Consumer literacy	Low literacy increases confusion; high literacy detects gaps.	Clear evidence enables informed choice.	Disengagement, scrutiny or advocacy.
Accountability infrastructure	Weak standards enable selective disclosure.	Assurance and traceability strengthen trust.	Reduced perceived risk.
Spillover effects	Exposure harms category-level trust.	Consistent evidence protects legitimacy.	Boycott, negative word-of-mouth or loyalty.

5. Consumer Trust-Accountability Framework

This review justifies the development of a Consumer Trust-Accountability Framework which consists of six elements that depend upon one another: Claim Architecture, Evidence Infrastructure, Source Credibility, Motive Attribution, Consumer Interpretative Capacity, and Institutional Accountability. Even if a claim can be true in terms of content, its failure may be caused by its vagueness, lack of support, inconsistency with corporate history and material relevance. The framework makes ESG marketing accountable.

Claim architecture calls for specific, bounded, and proportionate claims. Evidence infrastructure entails evidence that is measurable and accessible. Source credibility needs to come from independent verification and credible standards. Motive attribution is influenced by corporate history and recognition of tradeoffs. Consumer interpretative capacity is based on the ability of consumers to understand technical sustainability evidence.



Table 6. Consumer Trust-Accountability Framework for ESG marketing

Framework component	Key question consumers implicitly ask	Managerial requirement
Claim architecture	What exactly is being claimed and how broad is it?	Use specific, bounded and proportionate language.
Evidence infrastructure	What evidence supports the claim?	Provide measurable and independently verifiable proof.
Source credibility	Who is making or validating the claim?	Use credible certification and avoid opaque self-labels.
Motive attribution	Why is the firm communicating this claim?	Show long-term commitment and acknowledge trade-offs.
Consumer interpretive capacity	Can consumers understand the evidence?	Translate technical ESG evidence into clear information.
Institutional accountability	What happens if the claim is misleading?	Align marketing with governance, legal review and assurance.

The model results in seven propositions: claim precision increases authenticity perception; evidence visibility increases trust; opportunistic motive decreases trust; consumer literacy increases the ability to detect fuzzy claims in the presence of evidence; scepticism moderates the effect of greenwashing on purchase intentions; greenwashing causes category spillovers; and the integration of marketing, governance, and assurance turns ESG claims into advocacy.

6. Discussion and implications

ESG marketing is a credibility contest of symbol and accountability for consumers. Our research proves that good wording does not save a company from being accused of greenwashing. Credibility is based on the coherence of marketing, performance, governance and evidence. This result has theoretical importance as it links consumer psychology with corporate accountability and suggests that trust is not merely an attitude but a verification process.

From the perspective of management, ethical ESG marketing requires claims discipline. Sustainability claims should be specific rather than broad and should cover material impact, scope and limitations of measurement. Marketers should coordinate their efforts with sustainability, legal, procurement and assurance departments prior to making claims. Progress stories are less risky and more credible than perfection stories because they



accept trade-offs and invite scrutiny. Digital media can combine simple consumer-facing claims with evidence for those who would like to verify it.

Table 7. Managerial implications for ethical ESG marketing

Greenwashing risk	Consumer consequence	Recommended managerial response
Vague language	Scepticism and confusion	Use precise claims with boundaries and evidence.
Selective disclosure	Perceived manipulation	Disclose material trade-offs and limits.
Self-created labels	Low credibility	Use transparent standards and independent certification.
Overstated future promises	Moral backlash	Show credible plans, milestones and governance.
Channel inconsistency	Reduced trust	Align advertising, packaging, reports and website claims.
Weak accountability	Reputational spillover	Link ESG marketing to audit, legal review and corrective action.

Implications for policy makers are equally evident. Environmental claims and claims of ESG responsibility should be true, transparent, verifiable and proportionate. Public guidance like green claims guidelines would enhance the credibility of the market by providing an evidentiary framework. Higher accountability would help real businesses since it negates the reputation effect of competing firms who are only performing on symbols.

7. Contribution, limitations, and directions for further research

In this way, the paper contributes by conceptualising greenwashing as an accountability issue for consumers rather than simply misrepresentation through language use. It explains how ESG claims lead to trust and skepticism using different mechanisms and presents a framework that combines perspectives of signalling, attribution, persuasion knowledge, stakeholder, and legitimacy. It highlights that consumer literacies and firm accountability are complementary; without evidence being provided, consumers cannot assess ESG claims. There are some limitations in this review. It synthesises studies from diverse contexts, industries, and methods. Therefore, causal generalisations are limited. PRISMA numbers need to be updated based on final searches on the databases before journal submission. Further research should focus on testing this framework among



other ESG claims, for example, net zero, circular economy and nature positive marketing, and cultures, impact industries, social media platforms.

Conclusion

Greenwashing and sustainable marketing vary not only in the way they communicate their messages, but in their degree of accountability. While consumers accept ESG marketing, provided that the claims are concrete, evidence-based, proportional and related to governance, they reject them if claims seem abstract, opportunistic, exaggerated or unfounded. As per the Consumer Trust-Accountability Framework, the marketing of ESG products and services demands not only effective communication, but reliable performance, credible sources, valid evidence and institutional accountability. This can help ensure consumer trust in the market for sustainability.

Appendix A. Data extraction matrix template

Table 8. Data extraction template

Field	Description
Author/year	Bibliographic identification and study location.
Theory	Theoretical lens such as signaling, attribution or legitimacy theory.
Method	Experiment, survey, qualitative study, conceptual paper or review.
Claim type	Environmental claim, ESG claim, CSR claim, label or disclosure.
Consumer response	Trust, scepticism, purchase intention, loyalty, resistance or confusion.
Credibility cue	Evidence, certification, specificity, source credibility or motive.
Key finding	Main result relevant to greenwashing or genuine sustainability.

Appendix B. PRISMA 2020 checklist mapping

Table 9. PRISMA 2020 checklist mapping

PRISMA item	Location in manuscript
Title	Title identifies review focus.
Abstract	Structured summary of purpose, method, findings and contribution.
Rationale	Introduction explains need for the review.
Objectives	Research questions stated in the introduction.
Eligibility criteria	Table 3.
Information sources	Table 2.



Search and selection	Methodology and Table 4.
Synthesis method	Methodology and thematic synthesis.
Results	Thematic synthesis and framework.
Limitations	Section 7.

Declarations

Funding: The author(s) received no financial support for the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article.

Competing interests: The author has declared no competing interests.

Ethics approval and consent to participate: Not applicable. This study relies on a review of relevant literature and publicly available guidelines.

Data availability: There is no new empirical data set in this paper. The paper uses references from the literature review.

Generative AI disclosure: Generative AI tools may be used for language refinement and editorial structuring of an author-verified manuscript.

References

- Atkinson L, Rosenthal S (2014) Signaling the green sell: the influence of eco-label source, argument specificity, and product involvement on consumer trust. *Journal of Advertising* 43(1):33-45.
- Chen Y-S, Chang C-H (2013) Greenwash and green trust: the mediation effects of green consumer confusion and green perceived risk. *Journal of Business Ethics* 114(3):489-500.
- Connelly BL, Certo ST, Ireland RD, Reutzel CR (2011) Signaling theory: a review and assessment. *Journal of Management* 37(1):39-67.
- de Freitas Netto SV, Sobral MFF, Ribeiro ARB, Soares GRL (2020) Concepts and forms of greenwashing: a systematic review. *Environmental Sciences Europe* 32:19.
- de Jong MDT, Harkink KM, Barth S (2018) Making green stuff? Effects of corporate greenwashing on consumers. *Journal of Business and Technical Communication* 32(1):77-112.
- Delmas MA, Burbano VC (2011) The drivers of greenwashing. *California Management Review* 54(1):64-87.
- Du S, Bhattacharya CB, Sen S (2010) Maximizing business returns to corporate social responsibility: the role of CSR communication. *International Journal of Management Reviews* 12(1):8-19.



European Commission (2023) Proposal for a Directive on substantiation and communication of explicit environmental claims. European Commission, Brussels.

Forehand MR, Grier S (2003) When is honesty the best policy? The effect of stated company intent on consumer skepticism. *Journal of Consumer Psychology* 13(3):349-356.

Freeman RE (1984) *Strategic Management: A Stakeholder Approach*. Pitman, Boston.

Friestad M, Wright P (1994) The persuasion knowledge model: how people cope with persuasion attempts. *Journal of Consumer Research* 21(1):1-31.

Gatti L, Seele P, Rademacher L (2019) Grey zone in greenwash out: a review of greenwashing research. *International Journal of Corporate Social Responsibility* 4:6.

Lyon TP, Montgomery AW (2015) The means and end of greenwash. *Organization & Environment* 28(2):223-249.

Marquis C, Toffel MW, Zhou Y (2016) Scrutiny, norms, and selective disclosure: a global study of greenwashing. *Organization Science* 27(2):483-504.

Nguyen TTH, Yang Z, Nguyen N, Johnson LW, Cao TK (2019) Greenwash and green purchase intention: the mediating role of green skepticism. *Sustainability* 11(9):2653.

Page MJ, McKenzie JE, Bossuyt PM, Boutron I, Hoffmann TC, Mulrow CD et al (2021) The PRISMA 2020 statement: an updated guideline for reporting systematic reviews. *BMJ* 372:n71.

Rahman I, Park J, Chi CG (2015) Consequences of greenwashing: consumers' reactions to hotels' green initiatives. *International Journal of Contemporary Hospitality Management* 27(6):1054-1081.

Schmuck D, Matthes J, Naderer B (2018) Misleading consumers with green advertising? *Journal of Advertising* 47(2):127-145.

Seele P, Gatti L (2017) Greenwashing revisited: in search of a typology and accusation-based definition. *Business Strategy and the Environment* 26(2):239-252.

Suchman MC (1995) Managing legitimacy: strategic and institutional approaches. *Academy of Management Review* 20(3):571-610.

Szabo S, Webster J (2021) Perceived greenwashing: the effects of green marketing on environmental and product perceptions. *Journal of Business Ethics* 171:719-739.



- Tranfield D, Denyer D, Smart P (2003) Towards a methodology for developing evidence-informed management knowledge by means of systematic review. *British Journal of Management* 14(3):207-222.
- White K, Habib R, Hardisty DJ (2019) How to SHIFT consumer behaviors to be more sustainable. *Journal of Marketing* 83(3):22-49.
- Zhang L, Li D, Cao C, Huang S (2018) The influence of greenwashing perception on green purchasing intentions. *Journal of Cleaner Production* 187:740-750.

Certificate No.: 04072026043



**MULTIDISCIPLINARY COSMOPOLITAN JOURNAL OF RESEARCH
(MUCOJOR)-2583-9829 (On-line)**

International Peer Reviewed and Refereed Journal

CERTIFICATE OF PUBLICATION

The Board of Multidisciplinary Cosmopolitan Journal of Research
(MUCOJOR) is hereby awarding this certificate to

Dr. Sazina Khan

In recognition of the publication of the paper entitled
**Greenwashing versus Genuine Sustainability: Consumer Responses to ESG
Marketing Strategies**

Published in Volume 04, Issue 07, June 2026.

EDITOR IN CHIEF

Certificate No.: 04072026043



**MULTIDISCIPLINARY COSMOPOLITAN JOURNAL OF RESEARCH
(MUCOJOR)-2583-9829 (On-line)**

International Peer Reviewed and Refereed Journal

CERTIFICATE OF PUBLICATION

The Board of Multidisciplinary Cosmopolitan Journal of Research
(MUCOJOR) is hereby awarding this certificate to

Dr. Roshan Anant Gangurde

In recognition of the publication of the paper entitled

**Greenwashing versus Genuine Sustainability: Consumer Responses to ESG
Marketing Strategies**

Published in Volume 04, Issue 07, June 2026.

EDITOR IN CHIEF