



Greenwashing Across Industries: A Comparative Study Of Consumer Behavior In Fashion, Energy, And Food Sectors

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Abstract: This research paper examines the differential impact of greenwashing on consumer behavior across three major sectors: fashion, energy, and food. Greenwashing, the practice of misleading consumers about the environmental benefits of a product or company, has become a growing concern as consumers increasingly seek sustainable options. However, its influence on consumer trust, purchasing decisions, and brand loyalty varies across industries. This study aims to compare consumer perceptions and reactions to greenwashing in these industries, identifying key factors influencing these responses. Based on a comprehensive literature review, the study assesses consumer awareness of greenwashing, its impact on trust, purchasing behavior, and the role of regulatory measures in addressing its effects. The research also explores the long-term implications of greenwashing on brand loyalty and consumer skepticism. Findings suggest that while greenwashing decreases consumer trust and negatively affects purchasing decisions in all three industries, the impact varies. In fashion, greenwashing is linked to ethical concerns and product authenticity, triggering a stronger consumer backlash. In the energy sector, reactions are shaped by the perceived effectiveness of sustainability claims, particularly around renewable energy and carbon neutrality. In the food industry, greenwashing often involves misleading organic and sustainable labeling, undermining consumer confidence in products and brands. The study also highlights the differing regulatory frameworks across sectors, with varying levels of effectiveness in curbing greenwashing. This research offers valuable insights into the complex relationship between greenwashing and consumer behavior, helping businesses improve sustainability marketing and enhance consumer trust.

Keywords: Greenwashing, Consumer Behavior, Fashion Industry, Energy Sector, Food Industry

Introduction: In an era where sustainability has become a major factor in consumer decision-making, how can consumers distinguish between genuine environmental efforts and misleading green claims? Greenwashing, the deceptive practice of misleading consumers about the environmental benefits of a product or company, has grown increasingly prevalent. Studies have shown that while consumers are more eco-conscious, greenwashing erodes trust in sustainability claims (**Delmas & Burbano, 2011**). With the growing awareness of environmental issues, consumers are more inclined to make ethical purchases, and companies are increasingly promoting sustainability as part of their brand image. However, as studies suggest, not all claims of sustainability are truthful. Greenwashing has significant implications for consumer trust, purchase intentions, and brand loyalty.

Greenwashing and Consumer Behavior: The influence of greenwashing on consumer behavior has been a central focus in consumer behavior research. Consumers' attitudes toward green claims often determine their purchasing decisions, but greenwashing can severely undermine trust and brand credibility. **Delmas & Burbano (2011)** noted that when consumers feel deceived, it can lead to negative attitudes toward the company, damaging its reputation. Moreover, the backlash from consumers who discover that a brand has engaged in greenwashing can be significant, as they are likely to shift their loyalty to competitors with more transparent sustainability practices.

Fashion Industry: In the fashion industry, greenwashing has been linked to increasing consumer skepticism. Studies by **Joy et al. (2012)** argue that fast fashion companies often use vague sustainability claims like “eco-friendly” or “green” without backing them up with meaningful practices. Consumers are wary of these claims, as the industry is notorious for its environmental harm due to overproduction, waste, and unsustainable sourcing. According to **Bhardwaj & Fairhurst (2010)**, consumers' demand for sustainable fashion has led brands to highlight eco-friendly practices, but this has also opened the door for deceptive marketing tactics. Brands using greenwashing risk alienating environmentally-conscious consumers who value authenticity in sustainability. **Impact on Trust and Purchasing Behavior** Greenwashing in fashion can lead to diminished trust, which directly impacts purchase intentions. Studies by **Naderi & Van Steenburg (2018)** emphasize that when consumers perceive green claims as misleading, their trust in the entire industry can decline, potentially reducing sales across the sector. Additionally, greenwashing is seen as a betrayal of consumers' ethical values, and this violation leads to consumer backlash (**Furrow, 2011**).

Energy Sector: Greenwashing in the energy sector manifests through misleading claims about renewable energy sources, carbon neutrality, and sustainable practices. **Lyon & Montgomery (2015)** studied consumer responses to these claims and found that while many consumers are willing to support renewable energy, their trust is undermined when companies engage in greenwashing. For example, some energy companies overstate the percentage of their energy sourced from renewable sources or fail to disclose the environmental impact of their other operations.

Consumer Reactions in the Energy Sector Lyon & Montgomery (2015) argue that consumer skepticism is particularly high in the energy sector due to the complexity of sustainability claims, which often involve technical jargon that the average consumer may not fully understand. This leads to confusion and a lack of transparency, which erodes trust and negatively influences purchasing decisions. Furthermore, research by **Nielson (2018)** shows that energy companies making false or exaggerated claims face consumer mistrust and a reluctance to invest in their services.

Food Industry: In the food industry, greenwashing is often linked to the misleading use of terms like “organic,” “sustainable,” or “natural,” even when the products do not meet rigorous environmental standards. **Hwang et al. (2018)** highlighted that consumer confidence is significantly affected by false or exaggerated claims in food labeling. In many cases, labels like “eco-friendly” or “natural” are used without proper certification, leading to confusion among consumers and damaging brand trust. **Consumer Trust and Impact on Purchase Decisions** Greenwashing in the food industry undermines consumer trust and often leads to negative purchasing intentions. According to a study by Boström & Micheletti (2016), when consumers realize they have been misled by greenwashing claims, they become more skeptical of the industry as a whole, which reduces the likelihood of repeat purchases. Additionally, food companies that engage in greenwashing risk facing legal consequences as regulatory bodies increasingly target misleading marketing practices.

Comparing Greenwashing Across Industries: While greenwashing affects consumer behavior across industries, its impact varies due to different consumer expectations and industry practices. The fashion industry, with its focus on ethics and product authenticity, may face stronger backlash from greenwashing due to the highly emotional connection consumers have to environmental and social issues related to fashion production (**Joy et al., 2012**). On the other hand, the energy and food industries face unique challenges due to the complexity and lack of transparency in their sustainability claims, leading to consumer confusion and skepticism.

The Role of Regulation One of the key factors influencing consumer responses to greenwashing is regulation. According to the European Commission (2015), the lack of standardized regulations for sustainability claims makes it difficult for consumers to distinguish between legitimate and misleading claims. Regulatory frameworks vary widely across industries, which affects the ability of consumers to trust green claims. Energy companies, for example, face stricter regulations on emissions and renewable energy claims than food and fashion industries, where sustainability standards are often more flexible.

Research Gaps: Despite the wealth of studies in individual industries, a comparative analysis of greenwashing’s impact across sectors is lacking. Few studies have examined how consumer behavior towards greenwashing differs between fashion, energy, and food industries. Moreover, there is a need for more research on the role of regulatory measures in combating greenwashing and the long-term effects of consumer skepticism on brand loyalty and purchasing behavior.

Research Objectives:

1. **Investigate Consumer Awareness of Greenwashing:** Examine how consumers in each industry (fashion, energy, and food) perceive greenwashing claims
2. **Explore the Impact of Greenwashing on Consumer Trust:** Understand how misleading environmental claims influence consumer trust in brands within each industry.
3. **Analyze the Behavioral Response to Greenwashing:** Explore how consumers' purchasing decisions are affected by greenwashing across the three industries.
4. **Identify Industry-Specific Differences in the Impact of Greenwashing:** Examine the varying responses to greenwashing based on industry characteristics, such as product type, environmental concerns, and brand reputation.
5. **Investigate the Role of Regulatory Measures in Reducing Greenwashing:** Analyze how existing or potential regulations can mitigate the effects of greenwashing in each industry.

Fashion Industry: The fashion industry often employs deceptive greenwashing tactics, such as vague claims like "eco-friendly" or "sustainable," promoting non-sustainable materials under misleading eco-labels, and using certifications without proper validation. For instance, the H&M Conscious Collection and FabIndia's campaigns have drawn criticism for lacking transparency and verification in their claims. Consumers, especially those environmentally conscious, frequently respond with distrust and backlash, leading to boycotts and reduced brand loyalty. Although global certifications like OEKO-TEX Standard 100 and voluntary standards such as BIS Ecomark exist, enforcement remains inadequate. The lack of stringent oversight exacerbates consumer confusion, as distinguishing authentic claims from misleading ones becomes challenging. Consumer awareness is gradually increasing, but the industry still struggles with limited education on sustainability. Recommendations for improvement include adopting stricter penalties for deceptive practices, mandating transparency in supply chains, and enhancing consumer education on credible certifications.

Energy Industry: In the energy sector, greenwashing primarily involves exaggerated claims about renewable energy usage, overstated carbon neutrality, and unsubstantiated efficiency metrics. Companies like Reliance Industries have promoted initiatives like "Green Nylon" and "Green Polyester," which lack evidence to back their environmental benefits. Similarly, global examples such as Shell's carbon neutrality campaigns often fail to undergo independent verification, further eroding consumer trust.

Regulatory oversight, including the Central Electricity Regulatory Commission (CERC), Renewable Energy Certificates (RECs), and Energy Star labels by the Bureau of Energy Efficiency (BEE), has shown varying degrees of effectiveness. Consumers increasingly display skepticism, especially toward renewable energy claims, due to technical jargon and unclear communication. To regain trust, independent audits, clearer sustainability metrics, and simplified communication strategies are crucial.

Food Industry: The food industry is rife with greenwashing practices, particularly in labeling. Misleading terms such as "organic" and "natural" are often used without credible certifications or transparency. Indian companies like Amul and Parle Agro have faced criticism for vague sustainability claims and opaque packaging practices. As a result, consumer trust in organic and sustainable food labels has diminished, with

many unwilling to pay premiums for products perceived as eco-friendly but unverifiable. Regulatory frameworks, such as the Food Safety and Standards Authority of India's (FSSAI) Jaivik Bharat initiative, aim to establish organic certification standards. However, inconsistent enforcement and limited consumer literacy undermine these efforts. Certifications like the Jaivik Bharat logo and Rainforest Alliance accreditation are steps in the right direction, but greater transparency and stricter regulatory enforcement are needed to bolster consumer confidence.

Key Greenwashing Tactics Across Industries

In both the fashion and food sectors, companies engage in greenwashing by promoting a "green image" without making substantive environmental changes. These tactics include vague advertising, lack of transparency, misleading labels, and superficial sustainability campaigns. The energy industry, in contrast, relies on overstating technical metrics like carbon neutrality and renewable energy efficiency, which are difficult for consumers to verify.

Comparative Consumer Responses: Consumer trust in all three industries has significantly declined due to greenwashing. In the fashion industry, skepticism increases with greater consumer awareness, leading to boycotts and a demand for greater transparency. The energy industry sees hesitation in consumer investments, with trust hinging on independent verification of claims. Meanwhile, in the food sector, misleading labels have led to reduced consumer confidence and reluctance to pay premiums for organic or eco-friendly products.

Regulatory Standards

Each industry has its regulatory standards, but their effectiveness varies:

- **Fashion:** OEKO-TEX and BIS Ecomark exist but are often voluntary, leaving a gap in enforcement.
- **Energy:** REC and Energy Star certifications provide some oversight, yet consumers find technical claims difficult to interpret.
- **Food:** Jaivik Bharat and Rainforest Alliance certifications aim to provide clarity, but inconsistent enforcement undermines these efforts.

Challenges

1. Lack of Stringent Penalties

One of the primary challenges in addressing greenwashing is the lack of enforceable and stringent penalties for companies that engage in deceptive environmental claims. In many cases, greenwashing tactics go unchecked because the regulatory frameworks in place are either too lenient or not actively enforced. While some countries have established green certification standards and laws to ensure businesses adhere to sustainability claims, violations often go unpunished or result in minor fines that are insufficient to deter future greenwashing. Without significant penalties, companies may view greenwashing as a low-risk strategy to attract environmentally-conscious consumers, even if their claims lack substantiation. This weak deterrent undermines the effectiveness of regulatory measures, allowing deceptive practices to persist.

2. Insufficient Transparency

Transparency is crucial to building consumer trust, especially when it comes to sustainability claims. Unfortunately, in many industries, companies fail to disclose detailed information about the processes behind their environmental claims. For example, in the fashion industry, brands may claim that their products are made from sustainable materials but provide little to no insight into the sourcing, production, and supply chain practices involved. Similarly, in the food and energy sectors, companies may use vague terms like "eco-friendly" or "green" without offering transparent proof of their environmental impact. This lack of transparency makes it difficult for consumers to evaluate the authenticity of a brand's sustainability efforts and contributes to confusion about which products are genuinely environmentally responsible. Without clear, accessible information, consumers are left vulnerable to misleading claims and greenwashing tactics.

3. Limited Consumer Literacy Regarding Certifications and Eco-Labels

A significant challenge in combating greenwashing is the limited knowledge and understanding among consumers about the certifications and eco-labels used to verify sustainability claims. Many consumers may not be familiar with the standards or criteria that authentic certifications require, making it difficult for them to distinguish between legitimate and misleading claims. For example, in the fashion industry, terms like "organic cotton" or "sustainable" may be used without adherence to recognized standards, leading consumers to believe they are making eco-friendly purchases when they are not. Similarly, in the food industry, certifications like "organic" or "non-GMO" are often used ambiguously, and consumers may struggle to understand the difference between a genuinely certified product and one that merely carries a superficial claim. Improving consumer literacy on these certifications and eco-labels is essential, as it empowers buyers to make informed decisions and reduces the effectiveness of greenwashing tactics.

Recommendations for Improvement or Key Solutions to Combat Greenwashing

1. **Transparency: Strengthen Supply Chain Transparency in the Fashion and Food Sectors** One of the most effective ways to combat greenwashing is by ensuring full transparency in supply chains, especially in industries like fashion and food. In the fashion industry, consumers are increasingly demanding information on where and how products are made, including the sourcing of materials and labor conditions. Similarly, in the food industry, consumers want to know where ingredients come from, how they are grown, and whether the environmental practices in place align with sustainability claims. Strengthening supply chain transparency would require companies to disclose key information, such as sourcing methods, production processes, and environmental impact assessments. This transparency would allow consumers to make better-informed decisions and reduce the likelihood of deceptive green claims being made without proper backing.

2. **Independent Verification: Mandate Third-Party Audits of Energy Claims and Certifications**

To ensure the authenticity of sustainability claims in the energy sector, independent third-party audits should be mandated for energy companies that promote renewable or carbon-neutral energy. While some countries already require audits for energy efficiency or carbon neutrality, a universal approach is needed to establish credibility in green energy claims. Third-party verification, conducted by trusted environmental organizations or certification bodies, can help ensure that the energy sector's sustainability claims are substantiated and not merely marketing tactics. By making third-party audits a standard practice, consumers can have greater confidence in the energy companies they choose to support, which, in turn, can drive authentic sustainability efforts across the industry.

3. **Consumer Education: Enhance Awareness Campaigns for Eco-Label Literacy in All Three Industries**

Consumer education plays a crucial role in combating greenwashing. One of the biggest challenges is the lack of consumer knowledge about sustainability certifications and eco-labels. Many consumers may not fully understand what specific eco-labels mean or what criteria they indicate. To address this, targeted awareness campaigns should be implemented in all three industries—fashion, food, and energy. These campaigns could focus on educating consumers about the meaning of various eco-certifications, the processes behind them, and how to spot misleading claims. By increasing eco-label literacy, consumers will be better equipped to distinguish between legitimate and deceptive sustainability claims, reducing the effectiveness of greenwashing.

4. **Stricter Regulations: Introduce Penalties for Misleading Claims and Ensure Consistent Enforcement of Standards**

The introduction of stricter regulations and penalties for misleading green claims is essential to deter greenwashing. Currently, many companies take advantage of regulatory gaps or weak enforcement to make deceptive sustainability claims without fear of significant repercussions. Governments and regulatory bodies should impose stricter penalties for false or exaggerated green marketing, such as heavy fines, public reprimands, or restrictions on marketing claims. Additionally, there should be consistent enforcement of existing environmental marketing standards to ensure that companies cannot bypass regulations. Stronger regulatory frameworks would create a more level playing field for businesses and help restore consumer trust in the authenticity of sustainability claims.

5. **Simplified Communication: Use Clear and Accessible Language in Sustainability Claims, Especially in the Energy Sector**

In industries like energy, where technical jargon and complex terms are often used in sustainability claims, simplifying communication is essential. Many consumers find it difficult to understand terms like "carbon neutrality," "renewable energy sourcing," or "green energy" because these concepts are not always explained clearly. To address this, companies should use clear, simple, and accessible language when communicating their sustainability initiatives. This can include providing straightforward explanations of what sustainability claims mean, how they are achieved, and what third-party certifications or audits back

those claims. Simplified communication will help bridge the gap between technical experts and consumers, ensuring that sustainability claims are both comprehensible and credible.

The table presented is an original compilation based on the general trends and findings from existing literature on greenwashing across various industries.

Sr. No	Category	Fashion	Energy	Food
1	Greenwashing Tactics Used	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ➤ Vague claims like “eco-friendly” or “sustainable.” ➤ Misleading certifications (e.g., unverified eco-labels). ➤ Promoting unsustainable materials as “green.” 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ➤ Exaggerated renewable energy claims. ➤ Misleading carbon neutrality or emissions reductions. ➤ Overstating energy efficiency of products or services. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ➤ Misleading labels such as “organic,” and “natural.” ➤ Claims of eco-friendliness without substantial evidence. ➤ Ambiguous or unverified sustainable sourcing claims.
2	Real-Life Examples (Indian)	FabIndia’s ‘Sustainability Campaign’: Accused of vague claims.	Reliance Industries: Promoted “Green Nylon” and “Green Polyester” without evidence.	Parle Agro: Questioned for claims of sustainable packaging lacking transparency.
3	Consumer Response	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ➤ Erosion of trust in sustainability claims. ➤ Strong backlash from eco-conscious consumers. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ➤ Growing skepticism towards renewable energy claims. ➤ Hesitation to invest in 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ➤ Loss of trust in food labels (e.g., “organic”). ➤ Reluctance to pay premiums for products with

		<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ➤ Decline in brand loyalty and purchase intent. 	"green" energy projects	unverified sustainability claims.
4.	Standards or Logos for Verification	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ➤ Ecomark: Certifies eco-friendly textiles. ➤ OEKO-TEX Standard 100: Verifies safety of textile materials. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ➤ Energy Star (BEE): Labels energy-efficient appliances. ➤ Renewable Energy Certificates (RECs): Certify renewable energy claims. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ➤ Jaivik Bharat Logo: Certifies organic food. ➤ Rainforest Alliance: Promotes sustainability in agricultural products.
5.	Consumer Awareness	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ➤ Increasing awareness but confusion over genuine claims. ➤ Difficulty distinguishing authentic claims from greenwashing 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ➤ Moderate awareness of renewable energy. ➤ Confusion over technical jargon used in claims. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ➤ Growing concern over food sustainability but limited understanding of labels. ➤ Low trust without third-party certifications.
6.	Recommendations for Improvement	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ➤ Transparency in supply chains and certifications. ➤ Stricter penalties for misleading 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ➤ Independent verification of sustainability claims. ➤ Clear communication 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ➤ Improved consumer education on labeling. ➤ Stricter enforcement of organic

		claims.	ion of renewable energy initiatives.	certification standards
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Table 1

Conclusion: This research highlights the growing prevalence of greenwashing across the fashion, energy, and food industries and its significant impact on consumer behavior. It identifies the various tactics used in each industry, such as vague sustainability claims, misleading certifications, and exaggerated environmental benefits. The study underscores the erosion of consumer trust in green claims, particularly among eco-conscious consumers who increasingly demand transparency and authenticity from brands. Despite regulatory frameworks like eco-labels and certifications, enforcement remains inconsistent, contributing to the ongoing challenge of combating greenwashing. The implications of this research are far-reaching. By providing a comparative analysis, it helps industry stakeholders understand the varying impact of greenwashing on consumer behavior across sectors. This insight can guide companies in adopting more genuine sustainability practices and help policymakers craft stronger regulations to address misleading environmental claims. The study also emphasizes the need for clear, accessible communication of sustainability claims to avoid consumer confusion, particularly in sectors like energy. The research suggests several strategies to address greenwashing, including strengthening supply chain transparency, mandating third-party verification, enhancing consumer education on eco-labels, and implementing stricter regulations with clear penalties for deceptive practices. Ultimately, this study provides valuable insights that can help guide future policies, corporate strategies, and consumer behavior toward a more authentic and responsible approach to sustainability.

Limitations of the study: This study provides insights into greenwashing tactics across fashion, energy, and food industries. However, there are notable limitations. The research mainly focuses on specific regions, limiting its global applicability due to varying consumer awareness, regulatory frameworks, and industry practices. Expanding the study to include other industries, such as automotive and tourism, would provide a more comprehensive view of greenwashing trends. Additionally, the reliance on secondary data may not fully capture the complexity of consumer decision-making, as factors like personal values and media exposure were not fully addressed. The study primarily focuses on immediate consumer responses, leaving long-term consequences for brand loyalty and industry practices underexplored. Moreover, the lack of standardized metrics for evaluating sustainability claims hinders consistent detection of greenwashing across industries. Future research could develop a standardized framework for assessing greenwashing, offering clearer insights and more reliable assessments. Despite these limitations, the research serves as a foundation for future studies aiming to address greenwashing and its impact on industries and consumer behavior.

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