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Greenwashing vs. Green Trust: A Review Study of Consumer Perceptions and Responses to Sustainability Claims in Marketing

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Abstract
Greenwashing—the practice of misleading or exaggerating environmental claims—has become pervasive in marketing, often eroding **green trust**, or consumers' confidence in genuine sustainability efforts. This review synthesizes recent literature on how consumers perceive greenwashing versus authentic green marketing and how their trust and behaviors respond. We draw on key empirical and theoretical studies (2013–2025) to delineate definitions of greenwashing and green trust, examine psychological and contextual mediators (e.g., consumer skepticism, confusion, perceived risk, corporate reputation), and assess impacts on purchase intentions and brand equity. The consistent findings show that **perceived greenwashing** increases consumer confusion and perceived risk, which undermines trust and brand attitudes. Greenwashing detection triggers skepticism and negative word-of-mouth. Conversely, strong environmental knowledge, transparent communication and third-party certifications can bolster green trust. This review also outlines key strategies for rebuilding trust after greenwashing, such as apology campaigns and transparent, data-backed green claims. Regulatory developments like the EU Green Claims Directive are also shaping corporate accountability. Across sectors, greenwashing consistently weakens consumer trust and loyalty, reinforcing the need for genuine and credible sustainability communication.

Keywords: Greenwashing; Green trust; Consumer skepticism; Environmental marketing; Purchase intention; Brand credibility; Sustainability claims

Introduction

Growing environmental concern has made **green marketing** an important strategy for firms, but it has also led to widespread *greenwashing*—misleading or overstated ecological claims. As Halverson (2018) notes, greenwashing involves amplifying "green" features to the point of falsehood: it consists of *"deceptive or misleading environmental claims, which are false, vague, omit key information or a combination"*. This phenomenon threatens consumer trust in all green products. Indeed, Gräuler & Teuteberg (2014) warn that greenwashing "undermines the credibility of any Corporate Social Responsibility effort" and erodes consumer confidence in CSR statements. Regulatory bodies are responding; for example, the EU's forthcoming *Green Claims Directive* aims to prevent misleading marketing claims and "confusing ecolabels".

This review examines how consumers perceive and respond to greenwashing versus genuine green marketing, focusing on their **trust** and subsequent behaviors. We define **green trust** as consumers' belief in a company's sincerity and credibility regarding environmental claims (analogous to brand trust in sustainability). Based on a comprehensive literature review spanning from 2013 to 2025 across marketing, management, and psychology journals, this study synthesizes key insights on: (1) the definitions and identification of greenwashing; (2) its impact on consumer perceptions, including confusion, perceived risk, and skepticism; (3) the role of mediating and moderating factors such as environmental knowledge and brand credibility; (4) the effects of greenwashing on consumer purchase intentions and brand-related outcomes; and (5) strategic approaches to mitigate or repair damaged consumer trust.

Research Methodology

This study employs a systematic literature review methodology, guided by PRISMA standards, to explore consumer responses to greenwashing and its impact on green trust. A comprehensive search was conducted across databases such as Scopus, Web of Science, EBSCOhost, JSTOR, and Google Scholar for peer-reviewed articles published between 2013 and 2025. Keywords like "greenwashing," "green trust," "sustainability marketing," and "purchase intention" were used to identify relevant literature. After screening 312 articles and applying defined inclusion and exclusion criteria, 30 high-quality studies were selected for in-depth analysis. Data were extracted on research objectives, frameworks, findings, and implications. Thematic analysis was conducted to synthesize insights across five key areas: definitions of greenwashing, consumer perceptions, mediators and moderators, behavioral outcomes, and strategies for rebuilding trust.

Theoretical Framework

Concepts of Greenwashing and Green Trust

Greenwashing is now well-defined in scholarly literature. Bohr (2020) summarizes Halverson's (2018) definition: firms "amplify and stress upon green features to the extent that they even make false claims by misleading consumers". More broadly, greenwashing covers any "false, vague, or unsubstantiated environmental claim" (Delmas & Burbano, 2011). Importantly, greenwashing not only includes outright lies but also opaque or irrelevant eco-claims. Gräuler & Teuteberg (2014) report that greenwashing is so prevalent that 95.6% of "green" products examined had some form of greenwashing. By contrast, **green trust** refers to consumers' trust in a firm's environmental claims and commitment. It can be conceptualized as trust in the *brand's sincerity* about sustainability rather than skepticism about that sincerity. For example, de Sio et al. (2022) describe **green claim trust** as the mediator between advertising skepticism and purchase intention: higher trust in green claims weakens consumers' doubts and promotes green purchases. In practice, green trust depends on factors like visible eco-actions, third-party certifications, and honest communication. These constructs are clearly opposed: greenwashing increases consumer doubt, while authentic green marketing aims to build trust. The tension between them is the focus here. We next examine how consumers form perceptions and attitudes in this context.

Consumer Perceptions of Greenwashing

Consumers' perceptions of green claims hinge on *awareness* and *detection* of deception. Szabo & Webster (2021) report that when consumers perceive an advertisement or product as greenwashed, this alone triggers negative attitudes. In experiments, perceived greenwashing **increased consumers' perceived green risk and confusion**, and *decreased* perceived green value, brand attitudes, and purchase intentions. In fact, Szabo & Webster found that even consumers' *emotional experience* was affected: websites flagged as greenwashed elicited lower user happiness. In short, suspicion of greenwashing taints both rational judgments and affective reactions.

Perceived greenwashing also fosters skepticism and cynicism. Aji & Sutikno (2015) show that greenwashing leads to higher **consumer skepticism** and perceived risk. Similarly, de Sio et al. (2022) note that greenwashing heightens skepticism toward green advertising, undermining intentions to buy green products. This skepticism often spills over to broader attitudes: Policarpo et al. (2023) discuss how deceptive green claims "severely damage a company's reputation and erode consumer trust," extending distrust to the company as a whole. Tacit in these studies is that consumers attribute wrongdoing to companies that overstate environmental actions.

Consumer **confusion** is another recurrent theme. Greenwashing often involves technical or vague claims (e.g., "eco-friendly," "green" without specifics). In field studies, when products had multiple eco-labels or ambiguous claims, consumers became confused about real sustainability attributes. Nisa et al. (2022) review finds that greenwashing *increases green consumption uncertainty*: customers feel confused and unsure when confronted with misleading claims. This confusion itself is demotivating: Tarabieh (2021) showed that greenwashing-induced confusion, together with perceived risk, mediated a **negative** effect on green purchase intentions. In essence, when consumers cannot decipher a company's true greenness, they default to distrust.

Qualitative insights echo these patterns. Stoian (2025), in interviews across European markets, confirms that experienced "environmentally aware" consumers lose trust when they suspect any greenwashing. She reports that such consumers become more doubtful about all sustainability claims, not just those of the offending brand. In experiments, Timmons et al. (2024) found that teaching people common greenwashing tactics ("pre-bunking") made them flag more ads as greenwashed. While this increased detection, it also reduced trust in brands shown to be deceptive. Strikingly, many genuine ads were also mistrusted after the intervention, indicating generalized cynicism. Thus, consumer perception mechanisms are sensitive: once conditioned to see greenwashing, consumers become broadly skeptical.

Finally, it was reflected that demographic and psychological factors play a role. Studies often control for variables like environmental knowledge and concern. For example, de Sio et al. (2022) find that higher environmental knowledge **increases** trust in green claims, partially offsetting advertising skepticism. Conversely, when consumers have low prior knowledge, even accurate claims can seem dubious. Policarpo et al. (2023) introduce the personality trait **social cynicism**: cynical consumers are predisposed to disbelieve company motives and thus are particularly hard hit by greenwashing claims. They advise marketers that psychological barriers (e.g., entrenched cynicism) can exacerbate trust erosion beyond objective evidence. and concluded that perceived greenwashing consistently triggers negative perceptions: confusion, skepticism, emotional dissatisfaction, and negative word-of-mouth. These perceptions mediate the effects on trust and behavior as reviewed next.

Mediators and Moderators: Confusion, Risk, and Knowledge

Research identifies several mediators and moderators linking greenwashing to trust and behavior. Key psychological mediators are **green confusion**, **perceived risk**, and **consumer trust itself**.

- **Green consumer confusion (GCC)**: As noted, misleading eco-claims generate confusion. Chen & Chang (2013) originally found that greenwashing increases GCC. Tarabieh (2021) echoes this: "greenwash positively affects green confusion". When confusion is high, consumers feel uncertain about which products are truly green, weakening trust. Nisa et al. (2022) call confusion "green misunderstanding" and show it moderates the greenwash–trust link. However, some contexts find that confusion does *not* always mediate effects. Saxena & Sharma (2021) in India found greenwashing directly reduced green trust, but the mediating effects of confusion and risk were weaker than expected. This suggests cultural or industry differences in how much confusion arises.

- **Perceived green risk (GPR)**: This is the consumer's felt risk of buying an alleged green product. Chen & Chang (2013) and Tarabieh (2021) report that greenwashing increases perceived risk. When consumers suspect claims, they anticipate disappointment or even social embarrassment from supporting "fake green" firms. Aji & Sutikno (2015) explicitly link greenwashing to higher GPR. Perceived risk then undermines trust: Chen & Chang's model shows that greenwashing → higher GPR → lower green trust. In practice, heightened risk perception makes people avoid the product entirely (brand avoidance, as Mohammed et al., 2025 discuss).
- **Green trust (mediator)**: In several studies, "green trust" or trust in green claims serves as the key mediator between perceptions and behavior. De Sio et al. (2022) find trust fully mediates the link between skepticism and purchase intention. Similarly, the meta-study by Areethai et al. (2024) reports that *consumer trust* is a central mediator: perceived greenwashing "erodes consumer trust… and damages purchase intentions". Guerreiro & Pacheco (2021) likewise show that consumer trust and word-of-mouth fully mediate any effect of greenwashing perceptions on purchase intentions. Thus, trust often stands between greenwashing cues and outcomes: when trust collapses, so does intention to buy or recommend.
- **Environmental knowledge and concern**: These moderate effects. De Sio et al. show that better environmental knowledge leads to higher trust and thus greater resilience to skepticism. Sheikh et al. (2024) find that environmental concern can shape whether consumers punish or forgive greenwashing. The EU Green Claims Directive (as analyzed by Hormes, 2024) is also predicated on raising baseline knowledge and trust by legally requiring verifiable claims. On the flip side, Areethai et al. highlight that prior brand perceptions moderate outcomes: a trusted brand may suffer less from a greenwashing scandal than an unknown brand.
- **Brand credibility and capability**: Firm-related factors like brand credibility can buffer negative effects. Qayyum et al. (2023) show that strong brand credibility *moderates* (weakens) the negative impact of greenwashing on green brand equity. Ioannou et al. (2023) similarly find that a firm's *capability reputation* mitigates trust loss: highly reputable firms did not see a significant drop in customer satisfaction even when accused of greenwashing. Thus, established brands with solid track records can better withstand greenwashing exposure.

It was revealed that , models of consumer response to greenwashing are complex. Many studies adopt structural models (SEM) and experiments. However, there is consensus that **if greenwashing increases confusion and risk, this lowers green trust**, which in turn depresses attitudes and purchase intentions. Figure 1 (hypothetical model) captures this mechanism. (Figure omitted for brevity.)

Consequences for Purchase Intentions and Brand Outcomes

The erosion of green trust has tangible consequences for firms. Most directly, **purchase intention** declines. Szabo & Webster (2021) and Tarabieh (2021) both find that perceived greenwashing directly reduces consumers' willingness to buy. Guerreiro & Pacheco (2021) found that greenwashing perceptions *alone* do not always directly predict purchase drop-off – rather, their negative effects on trust and word-of-mouth fully mediate purchase intentions. But regardless, the practical upshot is the same: companies that are seen as greenwashing suffer sales losses.

At the brand-equity level, multiple studies document harm. Ha (2022) demonstrates that greenwashing lowers **green brand equity** indirectly. Their PLOS One study shows that while greenwashing did not directly drop brand equity, it did so indirectly by damaging green brand image and trust. Similarly, Qayyum et al. (2023) empirically confirm that greenwashing significantly undermines green brand equity (negative effect on brand equity index). They also note that brand credibility can cushion this blow, underscoring the importance of long-term trust building.

Beyond equity, greenwashing harms overall **brand loyalty and satisfaction**. Braga et al. (2019) in Brazil report that when consumers identify greenwashing, "the product… loses aspects of loyalty [and] satisfaction" and creates confusion. Halverson's survey work also notes that greenwashing leads to lower satisfaction with both the product and the brand's environmental initiatives. Repeat purchase and revisit intentions fall: in Rahman et al.'s study (2015), consumer skepticism from an "ulterior motive" saw in a green campaign *significantly* reduce intentions to participate in green programs and to return to the hotel.

Consumer communications (word-of-mouth) are similarly affected. Timmons et al. (2024) found that teaching people to detect greenwashing not only made them rate deceptive ads as less trustworthy, but also strengthened their *intentions to act pro-environmentally*, often by negative word-of-mouth or boycott. Policarpo et al. (2023) highlight that perceived greenwashing triggers widespread negative speech: "customers are reluctant to establish long-term trust" and often share warnings. Essentially, deceptive claims spur social media backlash and rumors, further compounding damage.

In extreme cases, corporate consequences include financial and legal penalties. Case studies in Areethai et al. (2024) note that once high-profile greenwashing is discovered (e.g. Volkswagen Dieselgate), the financial losses and fines can be enormous, reflecting lost trust. Even without scandal, persistent greenwashing dampens market growth of true green products: as Guo et al. (2018) cautioned, greenwashing induces skepticism that can *disincentivize investment* in genuinely green innovations. In short, greenwashing not only hurts the offending firm's current sales but can stagnate an entire sector's progress toward sustainability.

Finally, it was highlighted note industry and national contexts can influence outcomes. For example, Policarpo et al. studied the fashion industry and found especially strong reputational effects: greenwashing directly undermined trust in green clothing brands. The hospitality sector (Rahman 2015) saw similar impacts on customer satisfaction and loyalty. Areethai et al. call for more cross-cultural study, since emerging markets may exhibit different trust dynamics.

Strategies to Build or Rebuild Green Trust

Given greenwashing's harms, what can firms do to **build or repair green trust**? Research suggests multiple avenues, often mirroring broader trust-repair literature but tailored to sustainability.

- **Transparency and Verification:** A recurring prescription is that firms must substantiate claims. Rahman et al. (2015) advise seeking third-party eco-certifications to **guarantee credibility**. Regulatory standards (e.g. EU directive, FTC guidelines) are aimed at forcing such transparency. Wang & Walker (2023) advocate concrete interventions: they found that quantifying a product's green attributes (*"distrust regulation"*) and visually demonstrating actual green behaviors (*"trustworthiness demonstration"*) can restore trust. For example, showing the carbon footprint or proof of offsetting efforts gave consumers data to assess cost-benefits more accurately. Stoian (2025) similarly stresses informational efforts: clear, honest communication and verifiable actions are core to her proposed trust model.

- **Affective and Social Strategies:** Beyond facts, emotional honesty matters. Stoian emphasizes *affective* steps: initial **apology** messages acknowledging past mistakes are important "as a first step toward change". This is in line with trust-repair theory that a sincere apology can reset the relationship. Rashid & Ahmad (2023) go further: their model suggests demonstrating *integrity, benevolence, and competence* can rebuild trust. That means companies should show they truly care (benevolence), have the capability to deliver, and are committed to doing so (integrity). Green influencer campaigns that genuinely communicate values (Cai et al., 2025) also bolster emotional engagement and trust.
- **Inoculation and Education:** Some scholars test consumer-side remedies. Timmons et al. (2024) show that a pre-exposure "inoculation" to greenwashing can make consumers more vigilant. This improved their detection of false claims and (eventually) confidence in spotting deception, although it risked generating some cynicism. Such programs can be co-sponsored by industry groups or NGOs to educate consumers on common greenwashing tactics. For companies, collaborating in consumer education (e.g. explaining complex eco-labels) may therefore improve trust in legitimate sustainability messages.
- **Long-Term Commitment:** All agree that rebuilding trust is neither quick nor cheap. Stoian finds that **long-term commitment** is essential: one-time fixes or compensation are insufficient. Notably, she observes that *financial compensation* (e.g. discounts) can backfire with green-oriented consumers, who see it as buying off their disapproval. Instead, sustained organizational changes—like new leadership in sustainability roles or clear future action plans—signal genuine transformation. In hotels, Rahman et al. stress comprehensive green programs and consistent proof over superficial claims.
- **Leveraging Brand Reputation:** Firms with existing goodwill should leverage it. As Ioannou et al. (2023) show, high **capability reputation** can nearly neutralize the negative satisfaction impact of greenwashing. Well-known brands might afford short-term image hits if they promptly correct course and highlight trusted expertise. Nevertheless, this is not license to greenwash: even strong reputations will erode if deception is repeated.

It was concluded that remedies revolve around *authenticity and accountability*. Transparent, verifiable sustainability practices—backed by evidence and aligned with consumer values—are key to fostering and restoring green trust. For policymakers, this underscores the value of labeling standards and legal deterrents as complementary tools.

Discussion and Implications

The reviewed evidence paints a coherent picture: **greenwashing undermines consumer trust** at both cognitive and emotional levels, leading to negative behaviors and brand damage. From Szabo & Webster (2021) to Areethai et al. (2024), studies consistently find that consumers react adversely to deceptive green claims. Even in complex cases (e.g., green products that still contribute pollution), overclaiming triggers backlash. The ubiquity of greenwashing (over 90% of green claims per TerraChoice) means most consumers encounter it frequently. Over time, this can breed **generalized cynicism** about sustainability marketing. Indeed, Timmons et al.'s inoculation study suggests that heightened awareness can make even real claims seem suspect.

Yet, there are nuances. Some research indicates that not all greenwashing perceptions automatically crush purchases – consumers may need the intervening combination of trust loss and negative word-of-mouth for full impact. Additionally, demographic and individual differences modulate response: younger, more eco-savvy consumers may punish greenwash harder than casual buyers. However, the moral is clear: any erosion in trust has market consequences.

For theory, these findings enrich the advertising literature. They highlight the interplay of **affect and cognition** (Schmuck et al., 2018) in green contexts: deception affects not only reasoned judgments but also feelings and involvement. They also suggest extending models like the Theory of Planned Behavior to include trust as a mediator (as de Sio et al. do). Future research could quantify how much trust buffer is needed to sustain a brand's green positioning, or explore cross-cultural differences (Areethai et al. call for more studies outside Western contexts). From a managerial perspective, the implications are urgent. Marketing cannot treat sustainability as mere hype without repercussion. Companies should invest in genuine environmental improvements and communicate them with evidence. Simple claims (e.g. "eco-friendly") should be backed by numbers, certifications, or storytelling of concrete impact. When mistakes happen (as they will), quick acknowledgement and remediation are better than stonewalling. On the positive side, strong **green brand images** and social proof (word-of-mouth) can be leveraged: Guerreiro & Pacheco (2021) find that positive green engagement can overcome initial skepticism.

Regulators and standards bodies also play a role. The European Union's Green Claims Directive (analyzed by Hormes, 2024) represents an emerging legal framework to curb greenwashing. Coupled with voluntary guidelines (ISO 14021, etc.), such policies can raise the bar for evidence. Publicizing enforcement (like the VW fines mentioned by Areethai) can strengthen the deterrence signal.

Finally, it was concluded in the broader sustainability context, If consumers lose trust in corporate claims, it may hamper genuine green consumption and innovation. Guo et al. (2018) emphasize that distrust from greenwashing can "disincentivize investment in real green products". Moreover, greenwashing can spill over to degrade support for environmental policies if people suspect hypocrisy across sectors. In this sense, green trust is not just a marketing issue but linked to broader environmental progress.

Conclusion

This review demonstrates that **greenwashing** has consistently negative effects on consumer trust and related outcomes. Consumers react to greenwashing with skepticism, decreased purchase intentions, and negative word-of-mouth. Psychological factors (confusion, risk) mediate these effects, but trust emerges as the pivotal concept: without trust in green claims, sustainable marketing cannot succeed. Building **green trust**, therefore, requires concrete, transparent sustainability actions and credible communication. Studies emphasize that firms must "move beyond performative environmentalism" and embrace verifiable practices. Investing in credibility—via third-party labels, factual data, authentic storytelling and consistent long-term efforts—pays off in customer loyalty and brand equity.

For marketers and researchers, the takeaway is twofold. First, measure and monitor consumers' perceptions of green claims continually. Tools exist (consumer surveys, social media analysis) to gauge trust levels and watch for backlash. Second, integrate trust-building into green marketing strategy from the start. According to the literature, trust and integrity should be primary objectives, not afterthoughts. As the market for green products expands, competition will likely intensify pressure to claim environmental benefits. Our review suggests that only those companies that back up their claims with evidence will maintain competitive advantage. Ultimately, avoiding greenwashing and fostering green trust is not just ethical but smart business: it nurtures a loyal consumer base and ensures the viability of sustainable innovations in the long run.

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