

Trust Crisis in Sustainability Advertising: Examining Skepticism among Media Professionals

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Abstract

The growth of sustainability advertising has created a lot of academic concern on greenwashing, persuasive environmental communication, and ethical practice of PR. However, less explored, but more concerning, is a particular and distressing paradox, namely that professionals whose job is to provide media literacy training, namely journalists, PR practitioners, and students of mass communication, display the same trends with regard to trust deficit and avoidance of verification, as regular consumers. This research uses the Persuasion Knowledge Model (PKM) in order to question the discrepancy between professional competence and consumer behaviour based on a structured survey of 100 media professionals and journalism students. The results demonstrate that despite having the necessary instruments to assess the claims of sustainability, there is a low trust in the environmental advertising and no regularity in the habits of verification among the individuals with the instruments. This paper posits the argument that it is not an issue of awareness, but rather a matter of credibility within the system - a crisis of trust in sustainability communication that requires systemic change in the practice of industry and media education.

Keywords: Greenwashing, Persuasion Knowledge Model, Sustainability Advertising, Trust, Verification Behaviour, Media Professionals, Public Relations Ethics.

1. Introduction

Environmental sustainability has become a reputational anchor in the corporate world. In industries, fast food and fashion, as well as beverages and automobiles, brands have come to habitually incorporate green stories into their marketing, making them appear to be responsible caretakers of the environment. This has been commercially advantageous and culturally meaningful, as it has transformed the language of PR and re-packaged consumer expectation of the companies they shop in.

But the increase in sustainability communication has been accompanied by a corresponding increase in scepticism. One of the most widely-debated ethical issues in modern PR is greenwashing, which is building a false perception of environmental responsibility without taking any meaningful steps. The cases of McDonalds using paper straws and Volkswagen and its emissions scandal are only but a few examples of how the use of compelling environmental rhetoric is not a valid proxy of an actual commitment to environmentalism.

This paper is based on how media experts should be the most resistant to greenwashing. Journalists have been trained in checking facts. PR practitioners have a first-hand familiarity with the techniques of creating reputational narratives. The students of mass communication are taught media literacy and critical interpretations of advertising messages. Nevertheless, according to the survey data provided in this study, even media professional and journalism students cannot trust the sustainability claims and check them regularly.

The main aim of the paper is that sustainability advertising is undergoing a trust crisis, one that cannot be solely explained by the lack of proper consumer education, but rather as a structural lack of credibility inherent in the nature of communication in the industry. This paper looks at the mechanics of that deficit framed through the Persuasion Knowledge Model (Friestad and Wright, 1994), where the survey instrument identified Q1 (trust in sustainability claims) and Q2 (verification behaviour) are considered. The implications of the findings are vital to the practice of PR, regulation of environmental advertising, and media education curriculum design.

2. Literature Review

2.1 Greenwashing and the Ethics of Environmental Communication

Delmas and Burbano (2016) have defined greenwashing as the nexus between poor environmental performance and positive environmental communication. In its most basic form, it is a type of false signalling, a notion which is based on the information asymmetry theory, where it is cheaper to organisations to be environmental by use of words and images than to implement actual structural change. This economic rationale is transferred onto the practice of public relations to produce a pressure systematically to exaggerate and be vague with environmental messages.

Several types of greenwashing are defined in the literature. Executional greenwashing, the subject of a number of studies by visual persuasion scholars, is the use of green imagery, natural scenery, and eco-symbolic design features to generate a halo effect, a subconscious link to sustainability that is not necessarily related to actual corporate practice. Claims-based greenwashing, in its turn, entails the making of certain yet unproven or misleading claims regarding products or practices, including the 2018 commitment by Nestle to have 100 percent of its packaging recyclable by 2025, a claim that environmental organisations said lacked proper benchmarks, timeframes, and accountability procedures.

Seele and Gatti (2017) provide a typology of greenwashing accusations, which identifies the intentional deception, ambiguous communication, and inadvertent misrepresentation. The significance of this taxonomy lies in the fact that not every sustainability communication failure is due to bad faith - but the overall impact on consumer trust is alike, whether deliberate or otherwise.

2.2 The Persuasion Knowledge Model and Media-Literate Audiences

The theoretical perspective on this study is the Persuasion Knowledge Model (PKM) by Friestad and Wright (1994). According to the model, individuals acquire knowledge regarding persuasion efforts over time - they learn to detect when they are being persuaded and the knowledge triggers a coping mechanism that can be scepticism, resistance or reprocessing of the message. This is mostly implicit to the ordinary consumers. To media professionals, though, the knowledge of persuasion is developed explicitly and professionally.

This forms a unique dynamic. The professionals in the media are not passive consumers of sustainability advertising, they are trained users of the conventions. They have knowledge of strategic use of green images, rhetorical role of vague promises, and institutional constraints that influence corporate

communication. Their persuasion knowledge is significantly more advanced than that of a typical viewer in the language of PKM.

And, according to the study by Weder and Karmasin (2021) of sustainable communication and green public sphere, awareness does not necessarily lead to action. Lack of transparency and soundness of a message introduces a gap between the increased awareness and changed behaviour. This awareness-action gap can be seen not only in consumer behaviour but, as this study shows, in the verification behaviour of media professionals who have the tools to verify what is claimed but often not use them.

2.3 Greenhushing, Verification Fatigue, and the Credibility Vacuum

One of the counterintuitive trends in sustainability communication literature is the so-called greenhushing - the desire of truly ethical organisations to communicate their sustainability success less than they actually have done, lest it be met with the cynical disdain that has come to characterise green claims. This is a grave market failure, assuming that it is a fact: the organisations which should most be trusted by people are those least visible, and those with the poorest environmental records are still able to command the largest share of green advertising budgets.

This is worsened by verification fatigue. The mental cost associated with verification grows and the perceived utility of verification reduces as consumers, even media-literate ones, are continually encountering unsubstantiated sustainability claims. What this leads to is a sustainability communication paradox, the more organisations say the less the audience thinks; the less the audience thinks the less they take the trouble to check. Distrust is not destroyed by one instance of lying but by the compound effect of scepticism that surrounds us.

3. Research Gap

Despite the already present literature, the following gaps still exist in the current academic landscape:

The Professional Paradox: Most research has typically focused on consumers, but very little exists for professionals, including journalists and practitioners in PR, how they perceive their professional experiences of creating messages about their own behaviours.

The Verification Fatigue of Experts: There has been a lot of media literacy research, but there are gaps in our understanding of why trained fact-checkers, such as journalism students, struggle to verify sustainability claims, as consumers.

The Regional Context of the Global South: The majority of literature has been developed in Western markets; therefore, more focus should be on investigating the specific ethical dilemmas of PR practitioners in India.

The "Believe-Act" Disconnect: Researchers have not investigated why "sound research-based messages" are not more persuasive than "image-based messages" when presented to those who fully understand the ethical implications of the greenwashing syndrome.

4. Rationale of the Study

Ethical Reform in PR: This study will provide empirical evidence supporting the development of "responsible" PR practices that emphasise Environmental sustainability over Corporate Image.

Addressing the Belief-Action Disconnect: The survey comprised of an online questionnaire administered to journalists, PR practitioners, and mass communications students, who are knowledgeable about environmental issues, know about the media, and can effectively communicate with other individuals about environmental issues. Through this research, the author attempted to determine why

there is a considerable gap between what individuals say they believe about environmental issues and how they consume as consumers.

Educational Integrity: This research provides the basis for the construction of ethical frameworks for mass communications programs to give students the tools necessary to differentiate between real sustainability and false greenwashing.

5. Methodology

The quantitative research design used in this research study is a means of measuring and analysing audience's perceptions, attitudes, and behaviour toward advertisements related to sustainable development. Quantitative research is the most appropriate way to obtain a numerical dataset (from a defined population sample) allowing for an objective comparison of trends associated with individuals' exposure to, trust in, and influence of their communications regarding sustainability.

As mentioned above, this research is descriptive in nature, and intends to document how people currently perceive, understand and act upon sustainability advertising, rather than to establish cause-and-effect relationships. Additionally, the results of this project will provide media professionals and students with insight into how they view green advertising and their interpretation and reaction to ethical sustainability claims made by companies or products in today's media.

Furthermore, this research utilizes a cross-sectional survey methodology, whereby data will be gathered from respondents at one time, which permits focus on only the perspectives and actions of the sample audience at that time. A cross-sectional survey methodology is appropriate for gaining insights into people's existing attitudes toward Sustainability and Sustainability Communication at one point in time; therefore, findings will not be affected by modifications to the beliefs or practices of respondents over time. A structured questionnaire was administered to collect data from 100 individuals, composed of individuals working as news agents and also employed in public relations, advertising, or educational programs related to mass communications.

The questionnaire consisted of several types of items, such as multiple, choice and Likert, scale items, that measured how often the respondents were exposed to sustainability advertisements, how much these ads influenced their personal environmental habits, the impact of the ads on their purchasing decisions, their levels of trust in the sustainability claims, their verification habits, and the importance of sustainability in consumer decision, making.

The sampling strategy was designed to include representatives from industry professionals as well as students. Therefore, it allowed for comparative insights across experience levels while maintaining a shared foundation of media literacy. The data obtained were analysed with the help of percentage, based descriptive statistical techniques that made it possible to identify the most frequent response patterns and general trends in the dataset. This methodological framework offers a solid empirical grounding for comprehending the ways in which informed audiences interact with and assess sustainability advertising.

6. Findings

6.1 Overview of Survey Results

It is useful to sketch the bigger picture of the results that are presented before analyzing the trust and verification data in more detail. In terms of exposure, three quarters of respondents indicated that they had occasionally (11% very often) noticed sustainability advertisements. This is to mean that sustainability

advertising has gained some significant visibility in the media environment, at least among a media-professional audience.

The results of the behavioural impact are more ambiguous. The percentage of those who indicated having changed their personal habits in some way after being exposed to sustainability advertising is a combined 71.7 percent, but the quality of that change is striking: 48.5 percent said that they had changed slightly, and 23.2 percent said that they had changed a great deal. Importantly, 14.1% considered altering their behaviour but failed to do so - a classic sign of the awareness-action gap which is present in the literature. A similar moderate trend was observed in purchase decisions. Six out of ten people said they have ever bought a product at least once due to its sustainability advertising (26% many times, 34% once or twice). Nevertheless, 21% had thought about buying but ended up not doing so - yet another tendency towards partial persuasion that does not turn into behaviour change.

6.2 Q1: Trust in Sustainability Claims — A Portrait of Ambient Scepticism

One of the most important findings of this study is the trust findings (Q1). The questions regarding the credibility of the sustainability claims in advertisements were assigned to the respondents and the findings are quite illustrative as far as scepticism about sustainability is evident in most cases, though it is universal.

Survey Question	Key Response Options	Findings
Q1: How trustworthy are sustainability claims in ads?	Very trustworthy / Sometimes / Neutral / Untrustworthy	Only 6% very trustworthy; 37% sometimes; 36% neutral; 21% untrustworthy
Q2: Have you verified a brand's sustainability claims?	Yes regularly / Occasionally / Rarely / Never	Only 17.2% verify regularly; 41% only occasionally; 17.2% never verify

Only 6 per cent of the respondents found sustainability claims as very trustworthy. The plurality 37 percent said that claims are occasionally credible and a significant 36 percent were neutral. Combined, 21% of those who made claims considered them somewhat or completely unreliable (10 and 11 percent respectively).

What is interesting about these numbers is not merely the low degree of confidence, but the demographics of the people who are holding such a sceptical belief. These are not ignorant consumers who are coming across the idea of greenwashing so to speak. They are fact-checking journalists, PR practitioners who make a living off of creating convincing narratives, and communication students who learn how advertising works. Their scepticism is not the result of naivety but of an educated exposure,--the more important on this account.

The Persuasion Knowledge Model is educative to apply in this case. The PKM hypothesizes that the more one learns about strategies of persuasion, the more he or she is prone to engage sceptical coping processes whenever he/she identifies an attempt to be persuaded. Within the framework of sustainability advertising, media practitioners are extremely sensitised to the norms of green advertising: the appeal to the visuals of nature, the tactical use of ambiguous yet emotionally appealing wording, the linking of brand values and environmental care. This sensitisation produces a Sceptic Filter - a professional reflex that puts the credibility of sustainability assertions into question prior to their acceptance.

The outcome is a paradox. Sustainability advertising is making inroads to its target audience - media practitioners are starting to pay attention to it, and it is affecting their behaviour to a certain extent - yet is doing so in a fractured trust environment. The credibility of sustainability communication based on persuasive infrastructure has been eroded by the history of greenwashing by the industry itself, to such an extent that even the most legitimate claims of the industry are met with default scepticism.

6.3 Q2: Verification Behaviour — The Disconnect Between Competence and Practice

The verification data (Q2) states that there is a crisis of action should the trust data show a crisis of credibility. Participants were asked to look or read about a brand to tell whether the sustainability claims of the brand were authentic. The outcomes indicate that there is a massive gap between the professional potential and performance.

Just 17.2% of the respondents indicated that they looked regularly at sustainability claims. The largest percentage of 41% suggested that they did this only occasionally, 20.2% that they rarely did this, and 17.2% that they never did this. Still, using even the most liberal definition, less than a fifth of media professionals are in the habit of checking the sustainability claims that they encounter in advertisements. It is a contrapunt result having theoretical implication. One of the key forecasts of the PKM is that high persuasion knowledge should lead to more active coping reactions - the seeking of information to decide on the plausibility of a message. The data of verification shows that this coping response, despite its cognitive availability in the form of scepticism, does not provide a consistent forecast of the behavioural response of checking.

This can be explained in a number of ways and each has its connotations on how the trust crisis in sustainability advertising can be handled. First, verification friction can be quite a barrier. The task of checking a sustainability claim, locating third-party audits, reading an environmental impact report, cross-checking the news reports, even to media professionals is time-consuming and cognitively difficult. Even motivated parties will tend to default to assumption without the presence of a frictionless verification pathway. Second, and more upsetting, repeated exposure to unverifiable or misleading statements may have resulted in some sort of learned experience of helplessness, a feeling that verification is unlikely to yield conclusive results, and that the effort is not worth the cost. This is what the literature calls verification fatigue, and the fact that it takes place in a sample of media-professional points that the problem is structural, rather than personal.

Third, media work has the potential to dampen verification behaviour due to social and professional context. Norms exist regarding sustainability news and messages in organisations where journalists and PR professionals work. The institutional culture can suppress the desire of the person to have stringent environmental fact-checking in the case where such norms do not focus on stringent environmental fact-checking.

7. Discussion: The PKM Framework Applied

The presented study framework operationalises the PKM in four consecutive phases that shed light on four different aspects of the trust crisis.

The first sustainability advertising experience via media is Stimulus Phase. The contents of this stimulus may be categorized as being on a continuum where evidence-based communication which is founded on verifiable data and open disclosure occupies one extreme end, and image-based communication whose main goal is to protect or build reputational capital, occupies the other extreme end. The bulk of

contemporary sustainability advertising lies further into this spectrum on the image side which is also another origin of scepticism.

The Processing Phase instigates the operation of what this paper calls the Skeptical Filter, the professional reflex or media training and experience that challenges the validity of persuasive messages. This is a more narrow filter than that of regular consumers, and is utilized by media professionals. The trust data (Q1) indicates its working: it is only 6% of the trusts the claims on sustainability, the majority of those trusts follows the conditional or even sceptical approach.

The Verification Gate is the most critical point where the idea of professional scepticism is, in principle, to be transformed into fact-checking behaviour. The verification data (Q2) indicate that this translation is not successful in most of the cases. They all have the motivation (scepticism) and capability (professional skills) to do so and yet only 17.2 per cent do it regularly. And this is the most startling ending of the study: the Verification Gate is not a gate, it is an open door which is not traversed by a majority of the people.

The Outcome Phase is the net effect of these processes - a number of media workers that were more or less influenced by sustainability advertising, that were somewhat persuaded to change behaviour and buying behaviours, but are fundamentally mistrustful and unequally engaged in checking. And this is not the creation of a good communication ecosystem; this is the sign of a credibility crisis.

8. Policy, Practice, and the Regulatory Gap

The trust crisis that is reported in this paper is not in a vacuum of structural and regulatory situation. The policy environment within which sustainability advertising operates can be described as featuring what this paper describes as an enforcement vacuum - where regulatory frameworks are present, but lack resources, scope or authority to pursue corporations that make environmental claims that are not true.

The guidelines have been implemented by the Advertising Standards Council of India (ASCI) in India that stipulates that statements made with terms like eco-friendly, sustainable and carbon neutral should be supported with empirically sound claims. It is an important development, but it cannot be as effective due to the lack of proactive auditing. Formal complaints are the most responsive to regulatory bodies, and in this respect, a misleading sustainability campaign could possibly end its full lifecycle, where it creates reputational value to the brand and destroys the public trust in the process, before any kind of scrutiny is used on it.

This is worsened by the digital media environment. Transient versions of sustainability PR such as social media posts, influencer relationships, sponsored content are mostly beyond the regulatory frameworks of traditional broadcast advertising. Companies are able to make and withdraw claims with a speed and informality that renders verification and accountability very hard. In this respect the verification fatigue which is being witnessed in the media professionals is not merely the breakdown of personal discipline; it is a logical reaction to the system that renders verification really hard and seldom a matter of consequence. Here, case studies of corporate greenwashing analyzed in the original study are instructive. The McDonalds paper straw initiative, Nestle packaging promises, the new lids design at Starbucks, and the recycled plastic marketing of Coca-Cola are all examples of situations where the disparity between promise and reality was large, and regulatory repercussions were few or slow. The case of Volkswagen and its emissions scandal may well be the most severe instance of such a lasting, technologically advanced fraud: a prolonged, technically advanced lie that went undetected over the years because regulatory agencies did not have the expertise to question the science behind it.

All these cases contribute to the thesis that the crisis of trust in sustainability advertising is more of a governance issue rather than communication issue. It is the lack of strong third-party verification requirements that make the conditions of greenwashing being rational on the side of the corporations and scepticism rational on the side of the audience. To bridge the policy-practice gap, it is necessary to make environmental disclosure mandatory and standardised and associated with independent scientific audits, not in response to complaints, but as a requirement to make environmental claims.

9. Recommendations

This study has found that there are three interrelated recommendations to the trust crisis in sustainability advertising.

First, there is a need to shift to evidence-based PR as opposed to reputation-centric PR. Sustainability communication should cease being characterized by the use of persuasive narrative to revealing verifiable information. All environmental claims must be based on publicly available 3rd party audited evidence. This is the transformational change - storytelling to transparency - which is the background to restoring trust to the media professionals who as this study reveals are now some of the most cynical consumers of green advertising.

Second, compulsory eco-label certification links should be introduced on the online advertising sites. Regulatory authorities such as ASCI in the Indian case study ought to insist that any digital advertisements with sustainability claims must have a standardised, one- click link to an independently audited report of environmental impact. This intervention specifically targets the verification friction that was found to be a major hindrance to checking behaviour in Q5. It makes the Verification Gate a frictionless default by lowering the cognitive and practical cost of verification, making it a theoretical choice.

Third, there is an urgent need to incorporate environmental ethics as well as scientific literacy in mass communication education. The media professionals of tomorrow must be able to graduate with the ability to not only spot greenwashing, but to do significant environmental fact-checking. Majority of environmental science communication, carbon accounting, and supply chain transparency would enable the students to challenge the empirical foundation of sustainability statements instead of falling into ambient scepticism or passive resignation.

10. Conclusion

This research paper tried to discuss one of these specific paradoxes: why do media professionals, who have the critical means of scrutinizing the sustainability claims, exhibit the very same tendencies to distrust and aversion to verification as do the average consumer. This paradox is proved and enriched by the results of the survey. Even individuals in the knowledge of the functioning of sustainability advertising have low trust towards the advertising. It is seldom even checked as to those individuals who are able to do it. And the consciousness-behavior gap that characterizes consumer response to green communication is not minor between professionals and the masses.

Part 1 of this narrative can be accounted by the Persuasion Knowledge Model: The Skeptical Filter: The Skeptical Filter is a professional training that calls into doubt the validity of the sustainability assertions before committing to them. The only thing which the PKM fails to explain is the inability of that scepticism to cause verification behaviour, the unlocked door that no one walks through which the PKM alone cannot explain. According to this paper, it is explained by the structural conditions of sustainability communication, the enforcement gap in regulatory systems, the prevalence of image over evidence-based

messages, and the inherent compromising of credibility, which has made the process of verification a pointless effort.

A crisis of trust in sustainability advertising is a crisis of governance, at its core. It will not be resolved due to more creative strategy, more authentic brand storytelling, or even media education, which is significant. It requires institutional change: verification by third parties as a legal obligation and standardised disclosure, and a regulatory framework which could check the empirical character of environmental claims before they are put before the general audience. Until there is such an architecture, even the most media-savvy professional is going to be right in being sceptical of this - and the trust gap will not disappear.

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