

Greenwashing on Digital Platforms: A Special Reference to SDG 12

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ABSTRACT

The rapid growth of digital platforms has transformed the way businesses communicate with consumers. Social media, e-commerce websites, influencer marketing, company websites and online advertisements are increasingly used to promote products through environmental claims such as “eco-friendly,” “sustainable,” “green,” “natural” and “carbon-neutral.” When such claims are false, exaggerated, vague or unsupported by evidence, they may constitute greenwashing. Greenwashing is particularly important in relation to Sustainable Development Goal 12 (SDG 12), which promotes responsible consumption and production. Misleading environmental claims can prevent consumers from making informed and responsible purchasing decisions.

This descriptive-analytical study examines government regulations relating to misleading environmental claims in India and evaluates how ethical digital marketing can support SDG 12. The study uses secondary data from government legislation, regulatory guidelines, academic literature and institutional sources. Particular attention is given to the Consumer Protection Act, 2019, Consumer Protection (E-Commerce) Rules, 2020, Guidelines for Prevention of Misleading Advertisements and Endorsements for Misleading Advertisements, 2022, and the Guidelines for Prevention and Regulation of Greenwashing or Misleading Environmental Claims, 2024. The study finds that India has developed a significant regulatory framework for controlling misleading environmental claims. However, effective regulation needs to be complemented by ethical digital marketing practices, transparent disclosures, evidence-based environmental claims and consumer awareness. The study concludes that responsible digital marketing can strengthen consumer trust and contribute to the achievement of SDG 12 by promoting informed and sustainable consumption.

Keywords: Greenwashing, Digital Platforms, SDG 12, Ethical Digital Marketing, Consumer Trust, Misleading Environmental Claims, Consumer Protection, Sustainable Consumption, India.

INTRODUCTION

Environmental sustainability has become an increasingly important consideration in modern consumer markets. Businesses use environmental claims to differentiate their products and appeal to consumers who are concerned about sustainability. Digital platforms have made this communication faster and more influential through social media, online marketplaces, websites, influencer marketing and digital advertising.

However, the growing use of environmental marketing has also resulted in **greenwashing**. Greenwashing occurs when businesses create a misleading impression that their products, services or operations are more environmentally responsible than they actually are. It can take the form of vague claims, exaggerated

benefits, selective disclosure, unsupported certifications or attractive environmental imagery without sufficient evidence.

The problem is particularly significant on digital platforms because environmental claims can reach millions of consumers rapidly. Consumers may encounter sustainability claims in short videos, advertisements, product descriptions, influencer posts and social-media campaigns without having adequate opportunity to verify the claims.

Greenwashing is directly connected with **SDG 12: Responsible Consumption and Production**. Consumers can make responsible choices only when businesses provide accurate and meaningful information. Misleading environmental claims can therefore undermine responsible consumption.

India has increasingly recognised this problem. The Consumer Protection Act, 2019 provides the foundation for action against misleading advertisements and unfair trade practices. The Central Consumer Protection Authority (CCPA) subsequently introduced guidelines relating to misleading advertisements and, more specifically, greenwashing. The ****Guidelines for Prevention and Regulation of Greenwashing or Misleading Environmental Claims, 2024**** represent an important development in Indian consumer protection.

Therefore, the present study examines Indian government regulations concerning misleading environmental claims and evaluates how ethical digital marketing can contribute to SDG 12.

Greenwashing means using misleading environmental claims or communication to create the impression that a product, service or organisation is environmentally superior when the claim is not adequately supported.

Digital platforms include social-media platforms, e-commerce websites, company websites, mobile applications, online advertisements, influencer marketing and digital video platforms.

SDG 12 refers to Sustainable Development Goal 12 of the United Nations, which aims to ensure sustainable consumption and production patterns.

Thus, the title examines how misleading environmental communication through digital media can affect responsible consumption and how ethical digital marketing and regulation can help achieve SDG 12.

GOVERNMENT REGULATIONS ON GREENWASHING IN INDIA

India regulates greenwashing through multiple consumer-protection and advertising mechanisms rather than a single law. The **Consumer Protection Act, 2019** provides the primary framework against unfair trade practices and misleading advertisements and established the **Central Consumer Protection Authority (CCPA)**. The **CCPA Guidelines, 2022** require advertisements and endorsements to be truthful and non-misleading, including those published through digital platforms. The **Consumer Protection (E-Commerce) Rules, 2020** further protect consumers from unfair practices in online marketplaces and digital commerce.

A significant development is the **Guidelines for Prevention and Regulation of Greenwashing or Misleading Environmental Claims, 2024**, which specifically address environmental claims. The guidelines require claims to be **clear, accurate, specific, evidence-based, and verifiable**. They cover claims relating to recyclability, biodegradability, sustainability, carbon neutrality, and comparative environmental benefits. Businesses must also disclose relevant information, avoid selective disclosure, explain technical terms, substantiate future environmental commitments, and clarify the scope of claims. Digital tools such as **QR codes and URLs** may be used to provide supporting evidence, making the guidelines particularly relevant to digital marketing and e-commerce.

RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN GREENWASHING, ETHICAL MARKETING AND SDG 12

The relationship between greenwashing, ethical digital marketing, and SDG 12 can be understood through two contrasting pathways. In the negative pathway, greenwashing provides misleading environmental information, which can create consumer confusion and increase green skepticism. This may reduce consumer trust and influence consumers towards less responsible purchasing and consumption practices, thereby weakening the objectives of SDG 12. In contrast, the positive pathway begins with ethical digital marketing, where truthful and evidence-based environmental claims provide transparent information to consumers. This transparency can strengthen consumer trust, support informed purchasing decisions, and encourage responsible consumption, thereby contributing to SDG 12. The relationship demonstrates that ethical digital marketing and effective government regulation are complementary approaches: regulation establishes standards and accountability, while ethical marketing promotes transparency and responsible communication in the marketplace.

ROLE OF ASCI

The Advertising Standards Council of India (ASCI) is a self-regulatory organisation rather than a government authority. It provides guidelines for environmental and green advertising claims, emphasizing that such claims should be truthful, clear, transparent, and adequately substantiated. Its framework complements government regulations by encouraging responsible advertising practices and helping reduce misleading environmental claims in digital marketing.

REVIEW OF LITERATURE

Premi, Sharma and Dangayach (2021) Premi et al. (2021) reviewed the development of green marketing and examined consumer responses to green products. Their study highlighted the importance of credible environmental communication in encouraging green consumption. The study provides a conceptual foundation for understanding the relationship between green marketing and sustainable consumption.

Szabo and Webster (2021) Szabo and Webster (2021) investigated perceived greenwashing and its influence on environmental and product perceptions. Their study showed that greenwashing can influence consumer perceptions of both environmental performance and products. Their focus on company websites is particularly relevant to digital-platform marketing.

Meet, Kundu and Ahluwalia (2023) Meet et al. (2023) examined the influence of greenwashing, marketing-mix factors and socio-demographic characteristics on Generation Z's purchase intentions towards environmentally friendly packaged drinks in India. Based on data from 380 respondents, the study found that greenwashing can influence consumer perceptions and purchase intentions. The study is especially relevant because Generation Z is highly exposed to digital marketing.

Khattari and Tomar (2024) Khattari and Tomar (2024) examined greenwashing and green brand associations in the Indian packaged-food market. Their research found relationships between greenwashing, green skepticism and negative brand associations. The study emphasised the importance of evidence-based environmental claims and stronger regulatory mechanisms.

Zhang and Yuan (2024) Zhang and Yuan (2024) investigated greenwashing in relation to environmental campaigns on social media. Their study found that perceived greenwashing can reduce perceived company green value and brand attachment. The study demonstrates the importance of transparent environmental communication in social-media environments.

Persakis et al. (2025) Persakis et al. (2025) highlight a strong relationship between greenwashing, consumer skepticism, and declining trust. Misleading environmental claims can negatively affect brand image, consumer attitudes, loyalty, and sustainable consumption behaviour. The literature therefore shows that greenwashing is not only an ethical issue but also significantly influences consumer perceptions and purchasing decisions.

RESEARCH GAP

Previous studies have largely examined greenwashing in relation to **consumer behaviour, green marketing, and brand image**, while limited research integrates **government regulation, digital platforms, ethical digital marketing, consumer trust, and SDG 12**. The recent **2024 Greenwashing Guidelines** also require further academic evaluation. Therefore, this study addresses the gap by examining India's regulatory framework and the role of ethical digital marketing in promoting **transparency, consumer trust, and responsible consumption under SDG 12**.

RESEARCH QUESTIONS

1. What government regulations address misleading environmental claims in India?
2. How can ethical digital marketing support SDG 12 and strengthen consumer trust?
3. What role does ethical digital marketing play in promoting truthful sustainability communication?

RESEARCH PROBLEM

The increasing use of environmental claims such as “eco-friendly,” “green,” “sustainable,” and “carbon-neutral” can influence consumer decisions, but misleading claims may create confusion and reduce trust. Although **SDG 12** promotes responsible consumption, greenwashing can hinder informed and sustainable choices. India has introduced consumer-protection measures and greenwashing guidelines, but effective implementation and ethical digital marketing remain challenges. Therefore, the study examines the regulatory framework and role of ethical digital marketing in promoting transparency, consumer trust, and responsible consumption.

NEED FOR THE STUDY

The study is important as digital platforms strongly influence consumer information and purchasing decisions, while misleading environmental claims can reduce trust and hinder responsible consumption. India's 2024 Greenwashing Guidelines highlight the need for greater transparency and accountability. Ethical digital marketing can complement regulation by promoting truthful environmental communication and supporting SDG 12.

RESEARCH OBJECTIVES

1. To examine government regulations on misleading environmental claims in India.
2. To evaluate how ethical digital marketing can support SDG 12.
3. To compare sustainability communication tactics across Indian digital commerce platforms.

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

The study adopts a descriptive-analytical research design and is primarily qualitative, using secondary data from government publications, legislation, CCPA guidelines, e-commerce and advertising

regulations, academic literature, and institutional reports. The data are analysed through document, content, thematic, and comparative analysis to examine greenwashing, regulatory measures, ethical digital marketing, consumer protection, and their relevance to SDG 12.

RESULT AND DISCUSSION

Objective 1: To Examine Government Regulations on Misleading Environmental Claims in India

The study finds that India addresses greenwashing through a combination of consumer-protection laws, advertising regulations, e-commerce rules, and CCPA guidelines. The Consumer Protection Act, 2019 provides the basic framework for preventing misleading advertisements and unfair trade practices, while the CCPA Guidelines, 2022 require advertisements and endorsements to be truthful, transparent, and non-misleading. The Consumer Protection (E-Commerce) Rules, 2020 are also important as environmental claims are increasingly communicated through online product listings and digital advertisements.

A major development is the 2024 Greenwashing Guidelines, which specifically regulate misleading environmental claims and require terms such as “eco-friendly,” “sustainable,” “recyclable,” “biodegradable,” and “carbon-neutral” to be clear, specific, accurate, evidence-based, and verifiable. However, the effectiveness of these measures depends on proper enforcement, monitoring of digital platforms, transparent business practices, and consumer awareness. Thus, stronger coordination among regulators, businesses, platforms, and consumers is necessary to reduce greenwashing and ensure credible environmental communication.

Objective 2: To Evaluate How Ethical Digital Marketing Can Support SDG 12

The study finds that ethical digital marketing can significantly support SDG 12, which focuses on responsible consumption and production. Since consumers increasingly depend on digital platforms for information about products and their environmental impact, businesses must provide truthful, clear, specific, and evidence-based sustainability information. Avoiding vague claims such as “green,” “natural,” and “eco-friendly” can help reduce consumer confusion and prevent greenwashing.

Providing certifications, QR codes, hyperlinks, and online sustainability disclosures allows consumers to verify environmental claims and make informed purchasing decisions. Transparent communication also reduces information gaps between businesses and consumers, thereby improving consumer trust and credibility. Influencers and digital content creators should similarly ensure that sustainability-related claims are accurate and that promotional relationships are properly disclosed.

Overall, ethical digital marketing complements government regulations by improving the transparency, reliability, and accessibility of environmental information. This encourages consumers to make more responsible choices and supports SDG 12 through greater consumer awareness, trust, and responsible consumption and production.

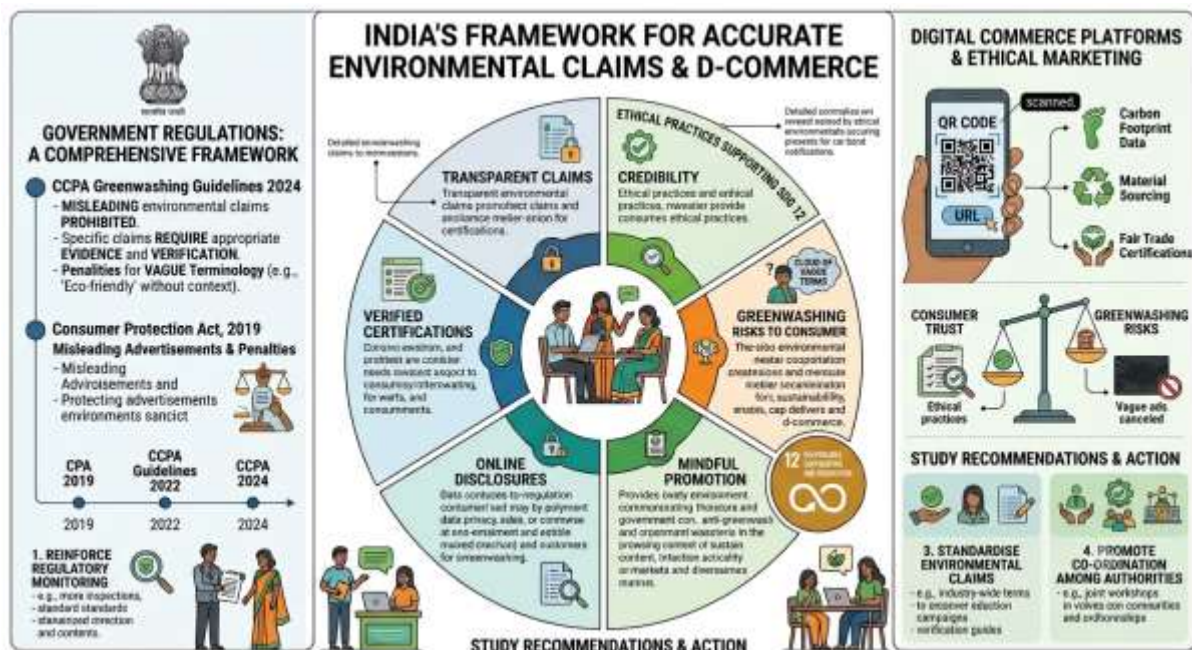
Objective 3: To Compare Sustainability Communication Tactics Across Indian Digital Commerce Platforms

The analysis indicates that Indian digital commerce platforms increasingly use sustainability communication tactics such as “eco-friendly,” “sustainable,” “organic,” “natural,” and “green” claims, along with information on recyclable packaging, biodegradable materials, responsible sourcing, and reduced environmental impact. Environmental labels, product descriptions, packaging claims, certifications, third-party verification, and social-media or influencer marketing are commonly used to attract environmentally conscious consumers. These communication methods can improve consumer awareness when the information provided is clear and supported by reliable evidence.

However, the comparison shows that the quality, transparency, and substantiation of sustainability claims vary considerably across platforms. Some businesses provide certifications, detailed product information, and evidence of environmental benefits, while others depend on broad or attractive promotional statements without sufficient supporting information. Such vague or exaggerated claims can create consumer confusion and increase the risk of greenwashing. Therefore, businesses should provide specific, measurable, transparent, and verifiable information, clearly indicating whether an environmental claim relates to the product, packaging, production process, or disposal stage. Greater standardisation and transparency across digital commerce platforms can strengthen consumer trust, facilitate informed purchasing decisions, and support responsible consumption under SDG 12.

SUGGESTIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS:

The study finds that India has established a comprehensive regulatory framework to address misleading advertisements, with the 2024 CCPA Greenwashing Guidelines specifically requiring environmental claims to be supported by appropriate evidence. Digital platforms can increase greenwashing risks but also promote transparency through QR codes, URLs, certifications, and online disclosures. Greenwashing may reduce consumer trust, while ethical digital marketing can improve the credibility of sustainability information and support SDG 12. The study recommends stronger regulatory monitoring, consumer awareness, standardisation of environmental claims, and coordination among authorities. Businesses and digital platforms should ensure clear, evidence-based, and transparent communication, while consumers should verify environmental claims and certifications before making purchasing decisions.



CONCLUSION

Greenwashing on digital platforms is an emerging challenge to consumer protection, ethical marketing, and sustainable development. Although India has strengthened its regulatory framework through the Consumer Protection Act, 2019, e-commerce rules, advertising guidelines, and the 2024 Greenwashing Guidelines, effective implementation remains essential. The study concludes that truthful, transparent, and

evidence-based digital marketing can strengthen consumer trust and promote informed purchasing decisions. Digital tools such as QR codes, URLs, and online disclosures can further enhance transparency and claim verification. Thus, the combined efforts of effective government regulation, ethical digital marketing, and consumer awareness can reduce greenwashing and encourage responsible consumption and production, thereby supporting SDG 12. In this context, **ethical digital marketing + effective regulation + consumer awareness → consumer trust → responsible consumption → SDG 12.**

LIMITATIONS OF THE STUDY

The study is limited to secondary data and therefore does not include primary data from consumers, businesses, or digital platforms. It focuses mainly on greenwashing and environmental claims in the Indian digital marketplace, limiting the generalisation of findings to other countries. The study also does not measure the actual environmental performance of individual companies or independently verify all sustainability claims made on digital platforms. Furthermore, the rapidly changing nature of digital marketing practices and environmental regulations may require future studies to update the findings.

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