Green or Greenwashed: Dilemmas in Sustainable Practices of Green Runs

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Abstract:

The growing emphasis on sustainability has prompted organizations to launch green initiatives such as Green Runs, designed to promote eco-conscious behavior among consumers. However, the fine line between authentic sustainability and greenwashing creates dilemmas in people perception and trust. This paper explores the phenomenon of greenwashing in the context of Green Runs by drawing upon qualitative analysis based on secondary data and case-based evidence. Findings indicate that while genuine green marketing enhances consumer loyalty and brand equity, misleading or exaggerated claims foster skepticism, green confusion, and erosion of trust. Applying attribution and trust theories, the study highlights how consumers interpret corporate motives and the emotional consequences of perceived deception. The research underscores the importance of transparency and accountability in green initiatives, offering insights for businesses, policymakers, and consumers navigating the complex dynamics of sustainability-driven marketing.

Keywords: Greenwashing, Green Marketing, Consumer Trust, Attribution Theory, Sustainable Practices, Green Run.

Introduction:

Sustainability has become one of the most significant priorities for businesses, policymakers, and consumers in the twenty-first century. The growing urgency of climate change, resource depletion, and environmental degradation has driven global interest in sustainable practices. Companies increasingly adopt sustainability-oriented initiatives to align themselves with the values of eco-conscious consumers. Within this movement, green marketing has emerged as a central strategy, positioning brands as environmentally responsible and socially conscious. However, the rise of environmental claims has also brought with it the persistent challenge of greenwashing, a practice where organizations exaggerate or misrepresent their sustainability efforts to gain market advantage. This tension between authentic sustainability and misleading claims forms a critical dilemma in the pursuit of green practices (Tanaji Salve and Jadhav, 2015).

The concept of greenwashing has been widely discussed since it was first coined in the late 1980s. It refers to practices in which companies manipulate information, highlight selective data, or make vague promises to portray an environmentally friendly image without substantial evidence. Such tactics not only mislead consumers but also undermine genuine efforts by organizations striving toward sustainability. Research shows that when consumers perceive greenwashing, it creates skepticism and distrust, which can negatively affect both the targeted brand and the broader credibility of sustainability-driven markets (Szabo & Webster, 2021). This is especially concerning given that consumers often lack the technical expertise to evaluate environmental claims, making them vulnerable to marketing deception (Jadhav et al., 2025).

In this context, Green Runs—community events and initiatives promoted as eco-friendly lifestyle practices—have gained popularity. These events often brand themselves as platforms to promote health, wellness, and environmental awareness, aligning with the global emphasis on sustainable living. Yet, questions emerge about whether such initiatives truly embody sustainability or whether they represent symbolic gestures designed to attract environmentally conscious participants. While these events promote values of eco-responsibility, the materials used, logistics of waste management, and long-term impact may not always align with their sustainability claims. Thus, the dilemma for consumers lies in distinguishing between genuinely sustainable practices and those that merely use the rhetoric of environmentalism (Dagde & Jadhav, 2024).

This paper examines the dilemmas surrounding sustainable practices in Green Runs, exploring how greenwashing shapes consumer perceptions and trust. By analyzing consumer responses through attribution and trust theories, the study sheds light on the psychological and ethical challenges posed by green marketing. Ultimately, understanding this dilemma is essential not only for fostering consumer awareness but also for ensuring that sustainability is implemented as a genuine commitment rather than a marketing tool (Jadhav, 2020).

The Dilemma of the Green:

People today face a paradoxical dilemma: they aspire to make environmentally responsible choices, yet they are skeptical of the authenticity of green claims. This dilemma is intensified by the increasing prevalence of green marketing in industries ranging from fast fashion to consumer goods. Young consumers, in particular, are shown to be highly aware of greenwashing and its consequences, yet they often struggle to translate their values into consistent purchasing behavior (Lu et al., 2022).

The perception of greenwashing can also lead to emotional responses such as frustration, disappointment, or even "brand hate," particularly when consumers feel deceived by companies they trusted (Santos et al., 2024). This suggests that the stakes for brands are high: while authentic sustainability can drive long-term loyalty, false or exaggerated claims can result in reputational damage that is difficult to repair (Rathod et al., 2024).

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Literature Review:

1. Rahman and Nguyen-Viet (2023) examined the intersection of green marketing strategies and consumer perceptions, emphasizing how transparency and authenticity directly influence trust in green brands. Their study highlights that when consumers perceive environmental claims as credible, green marketing positively enhances brand loyalty and reputation. However, if inconsistencies emerge, perceptions of greenwashing arise, undermining the brand's sustainability positioning. This work is especially relevant for initiatives like *Green Run*, where authenticity of sustainability claims determines consumer support and participation. Their findings suggest that consumer trust acts as the linchpin for long-term adoption of eco-friendly products and services.

2. Szabo and Webster (2021) explored the impact of perceived greenwashing on consumer perceptions of environmental and product performance. Their study found that exaggerated or misleading sustainability claims not only diminish brand credibility but also create skepticism toward the entire green product category. Importantly, they demonstrated how vague or ambiguous green messages foster confusion, reducing consumer willingness to make sustainable choices. For cases like *Green Run*, the risk lies in marketing sustainability without adequate substantiation. This contributes to the broader dilemma: even genuine initiatives risk backlash if their sustainability messaging lacks clarity or proof.

3. Lopes, Gomes, and Trancoso (2023) analyzed how greenwashing undermines sustainable consumption, particularly in circular economy practices. They found that consumers who perceive greenwashing often disengage, limiting adoption of sustainable alternatives. Their research underscores the "dark side" of green marketing—while meant to promote eco-conscious behaviors, misleading claims damage consumer trust and discourage future sustainable actions. Applied to *Green Run*, the study implies that superficial environmental branding may alienate participants, who may then generalize skepticism toward other sustainability initiatives. This reinforces the urgency for transparency and verifiable sustainability in event-based campaigns.

4. Nyilasy, Gangadharbatla, and Paladino (2014) investigated the interactive effects of green advertising and corporate environmental performance on consumer reactions. Their results showed that consumer trust is strongly dependent on alignment between marketing claims and demonstrable environmental practices. When claims diverge from performance, consumers perceive greenwashing, resulting in reputational damage and reduced purchase intentions. The study's insights apply directly to initiatives like *Green Run*, where participants may critically evaluate whether promotional claims match real sustainability actions. Misalignment risks not only skepticism but also long-term erosion of brand equity in sustainability-driven campaigns.

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Research Objective:

1. To examine how sustainability claims in Green Run initiatives align with actual environmental practices.
2. To analyze the role of transparency in distinguishing authentic sustainability from greenwashing in event-based campaigns.
3. To evaluate how secondary studies and case evidence highlight the risks and consequences of greenwashing in sustainability initiatives.
4. To identify key factors from existing empirical research that strengthen credibility and trust in green marketing practices.

The Evolution of Green Terms and Emerging Drawbacks:

Green term has undergone significant evolution over the last three decades, reflecting shifts in environmental awareness, corporate strategy, and consumer expectations. Peattie (2001) categorized its development into three broad stages: ecological marketing, environmental marketing, and sustainable marketing. The first stage, emerging in the 1970s, focused on addressing visible ecological crises such as pollution and waste. The second stage, in the late 1980s and 1990s, broadened to environmental marketing, where firms began aligning corporate responsibility with eco-friendly practices. The current phase emphasizes sustainability, integrating environmental and social considerations into long-term business models rather than short-term promotional strategies.

The academic discourse highlights both opportunities and shortcomings. Kilbourne (1998) argued that green marketing has often been constrained by traditional market paradigms that prioritize profit maximization, limiting its transformative potential. Similarly, Wymer and Polonsky (2015) suggested that while green marketing carries the promise of driving systemic change, it risks being over-framed as a panacea for environmental crises, leading to unrealistic expectations. These observations point to a core drawback: the gap between sustainability rhetoric and actual environmental impact.

Empirical research shows that the benefits of green marketing are evident when claims are transparent and verifiable. Vilkaite-Vaitone and Skackauskiene (2019) found that adopting a green marketing orientation can improve brand trust, loyalty, and competitiveness. However, the proliferation of vague or misleading claims—commonly referred to as greenwashing—undermines these benefits. Greenwashing generates skepticism, reduces public confidence in sustainability initiatives, and creates what scholars call "green confusion," where stakeholders struggle to differentiate genuine efforts from symbolic gestures.

The drawbacks also include operational and strategic challenges. Ghoshal (2011) observed that many organizations face difficulty in implementing green initiatives due to high costs, lack of infrastructure, or inadequate regulatory frameworks. Additionally, overemphasis on eco-labeling and certification schemes can mislead stakeholders if not supported by transparent auditing. This raises ethical concerns and highlights the need for stricter governance.

In summary, the evolution of green marketing reflects an ongoing attempt to balance environmental responsibility with

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corporate interests. While its potential lies in reshaping industries toward sustainable practices, its limitations—particularly the risks of greenwashing, miscommunication, and implementation barriers—continue to hinder progress. The challenge for businesses and policymakers is ensuring that green marketing transcends symbolic gestures and becomes an authentic driver of sustainable development.

Different Layers of Green Washing:

Consumer Skepticism:

Greenwashing often fosters skepticism by eroding trust in environmental claims. Leonidou and Skarmeas (2017) argue that skepticism emerges when stakeholders perceive inconsistencies between a company's green claims and its actual practices. Recent studies confirm that misleading eco-labels or unverifiable sustainability certifications heighten distrust, particularly in markets with weak regulation (Kovač et al., 2025). This skepticism reduces willingness to support green products and can extend to skepticism toward entire industries, amplifying the reputational risks of greenwashing.

Green Confusion:

Green confusion occurs when ambiguous or exaggerated claims make it difficult for individuals to distinguish authentic from false initiatives. Tarabieh (2021) demonstrated that unclear eco-labeling generates confusion, which in turn undermines decision-making confidence and increases perceived risk. Similarly, Rahman, Park, and Chi (2015) found that vague hotel sustainability claims led to confusion and disengagement, even when some practices were genuine. Confusion not only discourages environmentally responsible choices but also weakens the effectiveness of genuine green campaigns.

Emotional Impact:

The psychological and emotional effects of greenwashing are significant. Aji and Sutikno (2015) showed that when audiences discover misleading green claims, they experience frustration and feelings of betrayal, which can escalate into brand avoidance or even "brand hate." Younger demographics, in particular, are more emotionally reactive, as sustainability is closely tied to their identity and values. This emotional backlash intensifies reputational

risks for firms, as negative word-of-mouth and social media activism often follow revelations of greenwashing.

Corporate Incentives:

Despite these risks, many firms continue to engage in symbolic environmental practices due to strong corporate incentives. De Jong and Huluba (2020) note that competitive pressures, stakeholder expectations, and the desire for reputational advantage often push firms toward making overstated claims. Similarly, Chakraborty, Bresciani, and Troise (2025) show that institutional pressures, such as investor demands for ESG disclosures, drive companies to report sustainability metrics that are not fully substantiated. These incentives reveal why greenwashing persists: it offers short-term gains in legitimacy, even if it risks long-term trust and compliance challenges.

Case Studies on Pitfall of Green:

1. Greenwashing in Indian Corporates (NIFTY 50 ESG Disclosures): A study by Gidage, Bhide, and Bilan (2024) analyzed the ESG disclosures of India's top NIFTY 50 companies, uncovering significant gaps between stated sustainability goals and actual practices. Companies often portrayed ambitious commitments toward carbon neutrality, renewable energy adoption, or zero-waste targets, but supporting evidence was either vague or unverifiable. The research highlighted a pattern of symbolic compliance, where firms sought reputational advantages without measurable progress. This case underscores how Indian corporates sometimes rely on "green talk" rather than action, reinforcing greenwashing concerns.

It also points to the necessity of standardized reporting frameworks and stricter auditing to ensure credibility.

2. The Green Mirage in Indian Context: Karishma et al. (2025) presented *The Green Mirage*, a conceptual review that documented cases of Indian firms misrepresenting their environmental commitments. For instance, energy-intensive sectors advertised eco-friendly initiatives while continuing unsustainable practices, masking environmental harm with selective disclosures. The study also examined consumer-facing brands that marketed "eco-friendly" packaging without reducing plastic dependency in supply chains. This conceptual review revealed how CSR-driven green narratives often functioned more as marketing rhetoric than as transformative action. The Indian case demonstrates how greenwashing diverts attention from systemic sustainability challenges, obstructing authentic environmental responsibility.

3. Volkswagen Dieselgate: Volkswagen's "Dieselgate" scandal remains one of the most infamous global greenwashing cases. The company marketed its diesel cars as low-emission and eco-friendly while using defeat devices to manipulate emissions tests. When the deception was exposed in 2015, it triggered billions in fines, criminal charges, and long-lasting reputational damage. This case highlights how exaggerated environmental claims can devastate corporate credibility. It also shows how greenwashing not only misleads stakeholders but also undermines broader trust in sustainable technologies. Volkswagen's case is now frequently cited

as a cautionary tale in green marketing research and regulation.

4. Coca-Cola's Sustainable Packaging Claims: Coca-Cola, one of the world's largest beverage companies, has faced multiple allegations of greenwashing related to its "World Without Waste" campaign. While the brand pledged to recycle a bottle for every one sold by 2030, environmental organizations criticized the company for being the world's largest plastic polluter. Reports revealed inconsistencies between commitments and actual recycling rates, especially in developing countries. This illustrates how multinational corporations employ green branding to retain eco-conscious consumers while systemic production and distribution practices remain unsustainable. It highlights the gap between corporate promises and measurable sustainability progress.

5. H&M Conscious Collection: H&M launched its "Conscious Collection" as part of a push toward sustainable fashion. However, multiple reports, including regulatory inquiries in Norway, found that many garments contained minimal sustainable materials despite heavy eco-friendly marketing. The lack of transparency in sustainability claims fueled accusations of greenwashing, undermining consumer trust in both the brand and sustainable fashion as a sector. This case underscores how green marketing, when not backed by verifiable data, can damage entire industries by fostering skepticism. It also reinforces the importance of independent audits and third-party certifications to validate sustainability claims.

Findings and Conclusion:

The study reveals that while sustainability initiatives such as Green Runs are promoted as eco-conscious practices, they often struggle to balance authentic environmental responsibility with marketing motives. Findings highlight that authentic green marketing—when claims are transparent, verifiable, and supported by measurable actions—enhances consumer trust, strengthens brand equity, and promotes long-term loyalty. Conversely, instances of greenwashing, where claims are vague, exaggerated, or misleading, foster skepticism, confusion, and emotional backlash among consumers. This skepticism not only erodes trust in individual brands but also undermines the credibility of broader sustainability movements.

Case-based evidence, including high-profile examples such as Volkswagen's Dieselgate, Coca-Cola's packaging campaign, and H&M's Conscious Collection, demonstrates that reputational damage from greenwashing can be severe and long-lasting. Similarly, research on Indian corporates, including the NIFTY 50, shows that symbolic compliance and selective reporting of ESG metrics often mask the absence of substantive progress. Such practices illustrate the dangers of sustainability being reduced to a rhetorical tool rather than a transformative strategy.

The analysis further indicates that consumers, particularly younger demographics, are highly sensitive to greenwashing, responding with frustration, disappointment, and even brand avoidance when deception is perceived. Attribution theory explains this by showing that consumers assess corporate motives; when

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actions appear profit-driven rather than value-driven, negative judgments intensify. Trust theory underscores the centrality of transparency and accountability: without these, green marketing initiatives risk being dismissed as superficial.

Ultimately, the study concludes that the success of sustainability campaigns like Green Runs depends on moving beyond symbolic gestures toward verifiable and impactful practices. Transparency in communication, third-party verification of claims, and measurable long-term commitments are essential to bridging the gap between rhetoric and reality. While green marketing holds potential to align corporate growth with environmental responsibility, its credibility is contingent upon authenticity. Greenwashing, though it may yield short-term reputational gains, poses significant long-term risks by eroding consumer trust, discouraging sustainable consumption, and damaging the legitimacy of environmental initiatives.

Thus, the research underscores a vital implication: sustainability must be embraced not as a marketing strategy but as a genuine commitment. Only by aligning words with actions can businesses, policymakers, and consumers collectively drive meaningful progress toward a truly sustainable future.

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