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## Deconstructing Sophisticated Greenwashing: A Meta-Synthesis of Sustainability Communication Strategies on Social Media and Their Impact on Consumer Skepticism

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### Abstract

*The rise of sophisticated greenwashing on social media has revealed a sharp increase in misleading sustainability communication strategies, triggering consumer skepticism about sustainability claims. This study aims to identify a typology of advanced greenwashing strategies and analyze their impact on consumer skepticism through the lenses of persuasion, signaling, and attribution theories. Using a literature-based approach, data were gathered from recent academic sources relevant to greenwashing, social media, and consumer behavior. The findings indicate that inauthentic sustainability narratives enhance the perception of manipulation, leading to brand distrust. This study proposes a conceptual framework that outlines the relationship between greenwashing tactics, consumers' cognitive evaluation processes, and the emergence of skepticism in response to non-transparent communications.*

*Keywords: Greenwashing, Consumer Skepticism, Social-Media*

### 1. Introduction

In the current digital era, the increasing pressure on companies to project a sustainable image has led to widespread use of social media as a platform for communicating environmental initiatives. Through carefully curated content, brands attempt to present themselves as environmentally conscious, appealing to the growing demand for ethical and eco-friendly practices in the fashion industry. However, a disconcerting trend has emerged: sustainability messaging has become increasingly sophisticated, often masking deceptive marketing strategies that mislead consumers. Practices such as *green storytelling*, partnerships with influencers, and viral campaigns are used not only to inform but also to construct persuasive narratives that may lack factual integrity (Farhat et al., 2022); (Ktisti et al., 2021). These misleading approaches contribute to consumer confusion, ultimately damaging brand credibility and undermining sustainability efforts in the process.

This phenomenon has garnered attention in academic discourse; however, many existing theoretical models fall short of fully capturing the evolving complexities of *sophisticated greenwashing*. While the *Persuasion Knowledge Model* explains how consumers develop resistance upon detecting persuasive intent, it lacks specific elaboration on the digital tactics that shape this resistance (Nguyen et al., 2019). Similarly, *signaling* and *attribution theories* offer foundational insights into consumer interpretation of corporate motives but require refinement to reflect the layered and mediated nature of social media communication. Thus, a theoretical gap remains in understanding how carefully crafted digital narratives can simulate authenticity while embedding misleading messages that generate distrust and consumer skepticism.

This study aims to (1) identify and construct a typology of *sophisticated greenwashing* strategies employed by brands on social media; (2) analyze the impact of these strategies on consumer skepticism using perspectives from psychology and communication theory; and (3) develop a conceptual framework that links greenwashing tactics, consumers' cognitive processes, and resulting skepticism. By focusing on the communicative functions of social media, this study seeks to untangle the dynamics between corporate sustainability claims and the public's

evaluative responses, thereby contributing to the refinement of both theoretical and practical knowledge in the field of marketing communication.

Given the increasing relevance of this issue, this study argues that misleading sustainability communication not only risks reputational backlash but also threatens the overall credibility of the environmental movement. When sustainability claims are perceived as manipulative rather than authentic, consumers become more resistant and activate their persuasion knowledge to scrutinize all messages. Therefore, examining the interplay between digital strategies and consumer psychology is essential for identifying the mechanisms that drive skepticism. Anchored in the goals of this research, this inquiry is crucial for clarifying how *sophisticated greenwashing* operates and why it must be addressed in both academic and corporate contexts.

## 2. Literature Review

Greenwashing refers to a company's attempt to present itself as environmentally responsible through misleading or exaggerated claims, typically to attract eco-conscious consumers to purchase its products. It is a form of deceptive marketing in which the environmental benefits of a product, service, or policy are overstated or fabricated (Ktisti et al., 2022). Over time, this concept has evolved from simple false labeling to more subtle and strategic techniques embedded in visual branding and corporate messaging. In the context of social media, greenwashing is no longer limited to what is said but also how it is presented, making detection by consumers significantly more difficult (Farhat et al., 2021).

Modern manifestations of greenwashing are categorized under what is now termed *sophisticated greenwashing*, encompassing communication strategies that are aesthetically polished, emotionally persuasive, and digitally amplified. These include the use of immersive storytelling to frame the brand as environmentally active, influencer partnerships that lend social credibility to green claims, and viral media campaigns employing vague sustainability messages that are difficult to verify (Yu et al., 2025) (Sipos, 2024). This evolution has blurred the boundary between authentic sustainability communication and strategic image construction, posing challenges for regulators and consumers.

Consumer skepticism arises when individuals question the credibility or motives behind a company's claims, especially regarding its corporate social responsibility and environmental practices. It represents a defensive cognitive response that prompts consumers to scrutinize rather than accept a brand's message at face value (Lim and Lee 2022). In the marketing literature, skepticism is often linked to a consumer's prior knowledge, past experience, and perceived inconsistencies in a company's behavior. When messages about sustainability appear too perfect or heavily curated, consumers are more likely to suspect that they are being greenwashed (Demir, 2018).

Skepticism can take various forms, ranging from doubt about the message content to suspicion of a company's motives. Studies have distinguished between cognitive skepticism, which involves analytical processing of information, and affective skepticism, which reflects emotional distrust or disengagement (Nguyen-Viet & Nguyen, 2024). On social media, skepticism is often amplified because of the interactive nature of the platform, where users share opinions and validate each other's concerns. Thus, sophisticated greenwashing can unintentionally trigger collective resistance, damaging brand equity despite high engagement metrics (Adil et al., 2024).

Social media has emerged as a dominant channel for sustainability communication, offering companies the space to craft narratives, display environmental commitments, and engage directly with audiences (Agarwal et al., 2024). The visual and interactive nature of platforms such as Instagram and YouTube enhances a brand's ability to create compelling impressions of eco-consciousness among consumers. However, this same openness allows users to challenge, verify, or dispute corporate claims publicly, making social media both an opportunity and vulnerability for sustainability messaging (Jha & Verma, 2022).

The role of social media in facilitating both promotion and critique makes it a double-edged sword in the context of green communication. Brands can utilize digital storytelling, influencer marketing, and viral strategies to project sustainable values. Conversely, failure to provide transparent and verifiable information leads to growing skepticism and reputational damage (Huslan & Hassim, 2024). Thus, social media serves as a medium for delivering sustainability content and as a mechanism for shaping public perception and enforcing accountability.

### 3. Research Methods

This study focuses on *sophisticated greenwashing* within sustainability communication strategies deployed on social media platforms. This issue arises from the widespread use of ambiguous or misleading "green" claims by brands to enhance their environmental image, despite the lack of tangible environmental practices. Companies strategically leverage storytelling, influencer partnerships, and emotionally charged narratives to portray sustainability, often obscuring the actual ecological footprint of their operations. This practice distorts public perception and provokes consumer skepticism. This study focuses on dissecting how these practices are constructed and communicated, particularly in digital contexts, where visual persuasion and social influence shape the public's understanding of corporate sustainability.

This study adopts a library research approach, relying on qualitative analysis of academic literature related to greenwashing, consumer skepticism, and digital marketing communication. The primary data consisted of peer-reviewed journal articles and scholarly sources that directly addressed manifestations of *sophisticated greenwashing* in social media marketing. Secondary data include the broader academic literature on greenwashing typologies, consumer behavior, persuasion theories, and media studies. Sources were selected based on relevance, credibility, and publication recency (within the last five years) and were drawn from open-access journals, scholarly books and scientific reports. The selection criteria ensured that the data reflected the current academic understanding and aligned with the conceptual needs of the study.

The theoretical foundation of this study is based on three interrelated frameworks. First, the *Persuasion Knowledge Model* (PKM) (Friestad & Wright, 1994) posits that consumers use prior knowledge to detect and resist persuasive intent in marketing messages. Second, *Signaling Theory* (Spence, 1973) explains how companies attempt to send credible signals to consumers under conditions of information asymmetry; deceptive green claims represent "noisy signals" that disrupt consumer trust. Third, *Attribution Theory* (Heider, 1958) suggests that consumers interpret corporate actions based on perceived internal (authentic concern) or external (profit-driven) motivations of the company. These theories collectively frame how consumers respond to sophisticated greenwashing tactics cognitively and emotionally.

The research process involved systematic reading and interpretation of relevant written materials, including scientific journals, previous studies, academic papers, books, articles, and sustainability reports. Data were collected by identifying recurring themes, classifications, and argumentation structures related to greenwashing in digital contexts. This approach enabled the identification of patterns in communication strategies and consumer reactions. The analysis emphasized contextual depth and cross-comparison between multiple studies to synthesize an integrated understanding of the phenomenon, allowing the development of a conceptual typology based on empirical insights.

For data analysis, the study employed content analysis techniques to examine the structure, meaning, and implications of the relevant literature. This method enabled the researcher to categorize and code the data, identify the relational themes, and extract key theoretical insights. Through interpretive synthesis, this study revealed dominant patterns in how *sophisticated greenwashing* is executed and perceived in social-media environments. The findings were organized thematically to support the study's objectives and answer the research questions regarding typology development, the impact on consumer skepticism, and the creation of a conceptual framework linking greenwashing strategies to cognitive consumer responses.

### 4. Results and Discussions

Recent literature on *greenwashing* highlights its evolution from simple environmental exaggeration to complex, multi-layered persuasive strategies. In the social media era, this transformation is driven by the integration of aesthetic narratives and emotional appeals that obscure the lack of sustainability efforts. Studies show that Brands increasingly employ visual storytelling, symbolic imagery, and green branding elements to convey environmentally friendly identities without substantial proof of impact (Ktisti et al., 2022); (Sipos, 2024). These findings establish the basis for *sophisticated greenwashing* as a layered and calculated form of communication that blends deception and emotional resonance.

The explanation provided by this literature shows that *sophisticated greenwashing* functions not only through explicit claims but also through indirect persuasion. For instance, influencer marketing campaigns often associate products with nature-themed visuals, sustainability hashtags, and ethical lifestyles without direct statements about

environmental benefits (Farhat et al., 2021). Furthermore, the strategic vagueness of language used, such as “eco-friendly” or “green choice” avoids accountability, making it harder for consumers to verify the claims. In essence, the literature portrays a shift toward implicit manipulation under the guise of environmental ethics, where sophistication lies in the subtlety of the execution.

These findings strongly align with the real-world problem highlighted in this study: the increasing difficulty for consumers to distinguish between authentic and manipulative sustainability communications. The literature confirms that green marketing in digital spaces often prioritizes image over substance, reinforcing consumer confusion and mistrust. This connection illustrates that *sophisticated greenwashing* is not only a theoretical construct but also an observable and recurring phenomenon in the current marketplace. This also confirms the urgency of further exploring this issue, particularly concerning consumer perception and skepticism.

Consumer skepticism, as reviewed in the literature, is characterized by a questioning attitude toward corporate sustainability claims, especially when they are perceived as perfect or emotionally manipulative (Lim & Lee, 2022). This skepticism intensifies when messaging lacks specificity or credible support. The reviewed studies note that skepticism is not simply a lack of belief but an active resistance formed through evaluative thinking, often fueled by previous exposure to misleading green claims. The result is a defensive mindset in which consumers doubt even genuinely sustainable initiatives and products.

The literature explains that skepticism is shaped by a combination of cognitive and emotional processes. Consumers engage in attributional thinking, assessing whether a company’s environmental messaging stems from sincere values or profit motives (Nguyen-Viet and Nguyen, 2024). Additionally, the *Persuasion Knowledge Model* suggests that repeated exposure to marketing tactics increases consumers’ ability to recognize persuasion, making them more alert to the possibility of greenwashing. On social media, this effect is amplified through peer discourse, where users collectively question and critique sustainability messages, fostering a culture of skepticism toward sustainability claims.

This understanding directly links to the problem investigated in this study, where sophisticated yet unverifiable green messages contribute to widespread skepticism about green-washing. The literature demonstrates how the ambiguity and emotionality embedded in green marketing trigger critical reactions rather than trust. Thus, the challenge is not simply the presence of misleading claims but persuasive framing that conceals the lack of authenticity, making skepticism a rational consumer defense mechanism.

As discussed in various studies, social media is the central medium through which sophisticated greenwashing is constructed and disseminated. The literature identifies platforms such as Instagram, YouTube, and TikTok as spaces where brands curate sustainability content in a visually engaging way to build positive brand perceptions (Agarwal et al., 2024). These platforms enable the rapid distribution of green messages by leveraging audience interaction and influencer endorsement to enhance credibility. However, their open and participatory nature invites public scrutiny and challenges corporate narratives.

The literature explains that the success of sustainability messaging on social media depends not only on presentation but also on perceived transparency and the evidence provided. When users detect inconsistencies or overuse vague terms, they are more likely to express doubt publicly (Adil et al., 2024); (Huslan & Hassim, 2024). This reaction often takes the form of public comments, reposts with criticisms, or calls for accountability. Consequently, social media acts not only as a tool for green branding but also as a site of reputation risk.

These insights are directly related to the central issue explored in this study: the literature shows that social media intensifies both the reach and risk of sophisticated green washing practices. While it offers an effective means for brands to showcase their sustainability narratives, it also accelerates the formation of consumer skepticism when the content is perceived as misleading or unverified. Therefore, social media plays a dual role as a catalyst for eco-branding and as a space where consumer trust can be rapidly eroded by negative information.

The findings reveal that *sophisticated greenwashing* is not limited to overt environmental exaggeration but manifests as nuanced, strategic messaging embedded in social media narratives. Companies adopt emotionally charged storytelling, influencer collaborations, and visual cues to simulate environmental responsibility in their marketing campaigns. However, these tactics often lack empirical validation, leading to consumer confusion and distrust in the brand. Rather than fostering brand loyalty, these strategies activate consumer suspicion, particularly

when the messaging is overly polished or vague in nature. The cognitive dissonance experienced by consumers reinforces their skepticism, especially in environments with high peer discourse and media literacy.

Compared to previous studies, this research offers a distinctive contribution by constructing a typology of *sophisticated greenwashing* that includes aesthetic storytelling, symbolic messaging, and influencer endorsements without any substantive proof. While earlier research emphasized basic forms of greenwashing, such as false labeling or unverifiable claims (Yu et al., 2025), this study highlights more covert and socially mediated tactics such as green nudging. This elevates the theoretical conversation by situating greenwashing within the contemporary digital persuasion ecosystem. The proposed framework integrates psychological and communicative theories to map the process through which consumers interpret and respond to manipulative green narratives in real time.

The reflection emerging from These findings suggest that sustainability communication, if not managed ethically, becomes a source of reputational vulnerability rather than an advantage. The audience is no longer passive; consumers have developed cognitive tools to interrogate brand messaging, especially on digital platforms, where critical engagement is normalized. This study confirms that skepticism is not inherently negative but rather represents an informed response to perceived inconsistencies. Consequently, this form of critical reception may serve as a filter that ultimately rewards transparency and punishes performative activism.

The implications of this study extend to both academic theory and marketing practices. Theoretically, these findings call for a reevaluation of existing communication models that inadequately address the interplay between persuasion, literacy, and digital marketing. Practically, this study offers a diagnostic tool for brands to audit their communication strategies. By understanding how messaging may be decoded as greenwashing, firms can adjust their content to enhance authenticity and foster long-term relationships with consumers. The conceptual framework developed herein provides marketers and scholars with a structured way to analyze the causal pathway between messaging strategy, consumer cognition and trust.

The underlying reason for This pattern is rooted in the asymmetry between corporate intent and consumer interpretation. Companies may aim to appear sustainable to fulfill market demand; however, when the supporting evidence is weak or absent, the audience attributes such communication to opportunistic motives. Attribution Theory and the Persuasion Knowledge Model jointly explain how consumers shift from acceptance to skepticism. This transition is not random but is guided by prior exposure, perceived credibility, and emotional resonance. The more refined the strategy without accompanying transparency, the more likely it is to be perceived as manipulative by consumers.

In light of these findings, several actions are necessary. First, brands must adopt stricter internal guidelines for sustainability claims, ensuring that all messages are supported by verifiable actions and metrics to avoid greenwashing. Second, regulators should enhance policy standards for environmental communication, particularly on digital platforms, such as TikTok. Third, academic researchers and educators should advance public literacy on persuasive marketing and greenwashing. Companies must view authenticity not as an aesthetic choice but as a strategic imperative—one that protects both brand equity and consumer trust in an increasingly skeptical digital age.

## Conclusions

This study successfully deconstructed the phenomenon of sophisticated greenwashing on social media, concluding that it operates through nuanced strategies such as aesthetic storytelling, influencer collaboration, and the use of vague, symbolic messaging. The central finding is that these advanced tactics, far from persuading consumers, actively trigger skepticism and distrust of the brand. This reaction can be explained by synthesizing established theories: consumers utilize their persuasion knowledge to recognize manipulative intent, interpret deceptive corporate messages as "noisy signals," and attribute them to opportunistic motives rather than genuine environmental concern. Consequently, the more polished and emotionally resonant the communication is without verifiable proof, the more likely it is to be met with cognitive and emotional resistance, ultimately harming brand credibility. The implications of these findings are twofold, extending to both theory and practice in the following ways. Theoretically, this study highlights the limitations of existing communication models in capturing the complexity of the modern digital persuasion ecosystem and proposes a refined conceptual framework that maps the pathway from greenwashing tactics to consumer skepticism. For marketing practitioners, this study serves as a critical warning that inauthentic sustainability communication is a significant reputational risk. Brands should

adopt stricter internal guidelines to ensure that all environmental claims are supported by transparent and verifiable data. Authenticity should not be viewed as a mere aesthetic choice but as a core strategic imperative for building and maintaining long-term consumer trust in an increasingly critical digital environment. While this study offers a comprehensive typology and conceptual framework based on an extensive literature synthesis, its primary limitation is its library-based methodology, which does not include primary empirical data from consumer studies. Future research should therefore focus on empirically validating the proposed framework through experimental studies that expose consumers to sophisticated greenwashing tactics and measure the resulting skepticism. Further investigations could explore how these dynamics vary across different cultural contexts and social media platforms, such as TikTok and Instagram. Finally, future research could identify and test "anti-greenwashing" communication strategies that are effective in rebuilding consumer trust once it has been eroded.

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