

Consumers struggle to distinguish genuine and ‘greenwashed’ environmental claims in advertisements^{1, 2}

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INTRODUCTION

Consumer demand for sustainable products and services incentivises businesses to advertise their offerings as ‘green’. However, evaluating the truthfulness of such claims is difficult, creating potential for businesses to mislead consumers about their environmental performance. This ‘greenwashing’ poses risks for well-functioning markets. Businesses that invest in more sustainable processes must compete against others that make similar sustainability claims but without any cost or environmental benefit. European Union legislation is forthcoming to regulate many types of greenwashing, but consumers remain exposed before the legislation is implemented and some forms of greenwashing are outside its scope. We conducted an experimental test of whether ‘inoculating’ consumers against greenwashing tactics can boost their ability to distinguish greenwashed from genuine environmental claims on real advertisements.

DATA AND METHODS

A nationally representative sample of 2,000 adults took part in an online experiment. Participants were randomised into one of three groups. The treatment group of almost 900 participants saw a series of infographics that explained different types of greenwashing and completed a quiz to identify greenwashing in a series of product descriptions. The control group, also of approximately 900

¹ This Bulletin summaries the findings from: Timmons, S., Whelan, A. & Kelly, C. (2024). An experimental test of a greenwashing inoculation intervention in Ireland: Effects of ‘pre-bunking’ on identification, consumer trust and purchase intentions. *Sustainable Production and Consumption*.

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participants, read a short news article about climate change. Both groups then saw six real advertisements, three of which were examples of greenwashing and three featured genuine environmental claims. Participants rated whether they thought the advertisement was greenwashed, their trust in the brand's environmental claims and their willingness to purchase from the brand. At the end of the study, participants reported their likelihood of engaging in different pro-environmental behaviours (e.g., eating less meat) and their confidence in their ability to identify greenwashing. The third group, of approximately 200 participants, acted as a further control group. They saw the same six real advertisements but did not answer questions about greenwashing. Instead, they rated their familiarity with the brand, their trust in its environmental claims and their willingness to purchase from the brand.

RESULTS

The intervention had mixed effects. Participants in the treatment group reported higher perceptions of greenwashing on two of the three greenwashed ads compared to the control group, with corresponding decreases in brand trust and purchase intentions. However, they also reported higher perceptions of greenwashing on two of the three genuine ads. Despite this difficulty distinguishing greenwashed and genuine claims, the intervention boosted consumers' confidence in their ability to spot greenwashing. Learning about greenwashing also motivated consumers to act pro-environmentally in the future.

One challenge in evaluating the success of the intervention is that responses from the additional control group showed that participants were relatively unfamiliar with the brands that displayed genuine claims. The intervention may help to identify genuine claims made by more familiar brands.

CONCLUSIONS

Our findings suggest that interventions to educate consumers about greenwashing may increase scepticism for environmental claims more broadly, such that genuinely sustainable brands that are not already familiar to consumers will struggle to convey their authentic message. While informing consumers about greenwashing strategies may motivate them to engage in general pro-environmental action, systems-level regulations on the kinds of claims firms can make are likely to be more effective than individual-level interventions to address the harms caused by greenwashing.