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### Greenwashing Away the Truth: Dishonesty in Environmental Marketing

As society becomes increasingly aware of climate change, areas of life once considered completely independent from environmental issues intersect with a modern push for sustainability. Intensified by social media's rapid dissemination of information, the environmental movement has become a growing cause for consumers and a festering nuisance to large corporations. However, by employing green marketing, several industries have interpreted this growing environmentalism as an advertisement tool they can wield rather than an annoyance they must submit to. Motivated by profit alone, several companies have abused this consumer trend, falsely portraying their products as sustainable or misrepresenting their "green initiatives." These higher prices for products that are actually no better in quality creates a hardship for the low-income consumer. Current legislation allows room for companies to greenwash, or falsely market a product as environmentally-friendly, perpetuating fraud and impacting public ability to actually fight climate change.

Although the use of dishonest marketing techniques has increased since the mid-19th century era of industrialization and consumerism, greenwashing in particular arose from the green movement of the 1970s. Awareness and passion for the environment came to a head during the 1970s Earth Day, at which 20 million people gathered to perform demonstrations about the increasing degradation of the environment ("Today in History"). Consumers were not alone in their increasing awareness of environmentalism, however. Corporations soon caught on to the

increasing public interest in the 1980s, when the Clinton administration received multitudes of positive feedback after boosting green initiatives. Companies began to market their products as sustainable, giving birth to green marketing. However, there were no guidelines or restrictions on this type of marketing because it was so new (Karasov). Advertisers began to abuse eco-friendly advertising and packaging techniques, giving birth to the deceptive greenwashing that persists today.

In an industrial, consumerist economy, the line between effective marketing and fraudulent advertising is extremely blurry. Persuasive language is a difficult thing to regulate, especially when advertising is everywhere, and is a tool company marketers feel they must use to sell products and remain competitive. Terms commonly used by environmental advertisers include, but are not limited to: “environmentally friendly,” “safe for the environment,” “recycled,” “degradable,” “biodegradable,” “compostable,” and “recyclable” (“Green advertising”). By employing this extremely vague language, corporations easily avoid accountability when it comes to claims about a product (BBC). However, regulators, noticing the sudden increase in green advertising, began to enforce restrictions to marketing language. In 1990, ten state attorneys general called for greater standards and accountability in the use of the above terms in marketing practices (“Green advertising”). In addition to the false claims companies make about the sustainability of their products, corporations can also greenwash by promising to support an environmental charity like the World Wildlife Fund, when these affiliations are often unfounded and unchecked by regulatory agencies. Furthermore, greenwashing can occur at various degrees, which makes this false presentation even more confusing for consumers. While companies can outright lie about their products being sustainable, they can also employ more subtle methods, wrapping their product in new

green-hued packaging or changing the font to seem more “granola,” or trendy in an environmental sense. This may not be as fraudulent as other false claims marketers have made, but this subtle messaging still taints corporation-consumer relationships, tricking consumers into purchasing products that do not actually benefit the environment.

So, companies may explicitly lie about their products in order to increase sales and gain popularity. However, even though we live in a free-market system, there are regulations that monitor manufacturing and advertising. Organizations like the Federal Trade Commission are responsible for imposing regulations on corporations and protecting consumers. However, according to Cecilia Parker Aaranha, the Director for Consumer Protection at the Competition and Markets Authority, current regulations only encourage the disclosure of environmental information to consumers, they do not require it. This means that companies can legally avoid the full disclosure of their environmental impacts and can portray their products as sustainable, when in reality that is not the case. Furthermore, even if a company does disclose all of its environmental information, this data is very hard to verify. In other words, consumers cannot tell the difference between these verifiable claims and the false, exaggerated ones. This is due to not only the lack of attention to labeling, but the shortage of government personnel available to regulate and inspect green claims. Furthermore, in the U.S, there are no reputable sustainability certifications, other than the EnergyStar label, which certifies an appliance as energy efficient, and the USDA Organic Certification, which only verifies the sustainable methods in which food products are produced. However, there is no label that can certify other consumer goods as sustainable, so consumers are left to guess, attempting to discern true environmentalism from advertising fraud. Consumers are not the only group affected by this lack of green representation, as companies producing truly sustainable products have no way of assuring customers that their

product is not a scam, and is indeed produced with the environment in mind. So, the only way for these companies to highlight their green initiatives is through packaging and advertising, which, due to the fraudulent nature of marketing, consumers cannot trust. This dilemma explains the value-action gap observed in consumers; many buyers would like to buy green products, but do not act on these values for the reasons stated above (“green advertising”). Thus, there is a gap between consumer values and their actions that marketing regulations cannot repair.

Companies greenwash for one purpose: profit. In a capitalist system, companies must compete with one another, constantly working to either improve their product, appeal to a wider audience, or reduce costs to maximize profits. Due to this economic system’s strong presence in not only American business but American culture, fraudulent advertising has become normalized. In the modern market, lying to consumers to increase the appeal of a product becomes more and more necessary as competition increases. Technology enables large corporations to produce high volumes of product for lower and lower costs. Thus, to compete with these seemingly invincible institutions, companies must attract consumers to their product in a different way. Many companies have taken advantage of the growing environmental movement, employing greenwashing to convince buyers to choose their product over a competing alternative. While some companies are guilty of falsely portraying their green initiatives, other corporations adopt a different strategy to compete: they actively fight against green policies. For example, General Motors has even lobbied for lower car emission standards, simply because producing a greener car is more expensive and will ultimately minimize profit (Allen). Not only does our profit-focused economy make it difficult to implement green policies, but capitalism actively works against existing international green practices. The increasing globalization of the American capitalist economy also poses threats to efforts to regulate green

marketing, as “shopping across borders” means that international consumer protection laws must come into play. So, while countries like Japan, Germany, and Canada have greenwash-regulating programs run by the government, there is no standardized law regulating imported goods that come from countries with no regulation system in place. Furthermore, while public concern and activism for the environment grows, efforts to reinforce America’s capitalist economy increases simultaneously (Klein). However, these movements cannot coexist, as a growing capitalist economy fosters more competition and ultimately forces companies to invent new, unsustainable ways (like greenwashing) to compete. In other words, as more businesses and countries compete to sell the same products, there is increasing incentive to appeal to consumers through either lower prices or more effective advertising. A reduction in prices could mean a cut in environmental initiatives, while an attempt to increase revenue through advertising leads to unclear and problematic marketing techniques like greenwashing. For example, in 1992, the United Nations signed the Framework Convention on Climate Change, only to approve the North American Free Trade Agreement a few months later (Klein). This agreement boosted product manufacturing but only fueled the capitalistic fire that cannot coexist with sustainability. Ultimately, due to the profit-focused nature of the capitalistic economy, sustainability may never be prioritized and therefore is impossible to achieve under the current system.

As their interest in sustainability increases, consumers are faced with everyday purchasing decisions that, although they seem insignificant, affect the environment. Although the purchase of one unsustainable product only has a miniscule actual impact on the climate, when consumers purchase a product, they provide data for the company on what is profitable. This market data informs company decisions and may lead to the perpetuation of fraudulent marketing tactics such as greenwashing. Again, greenwashing involves lying to consumers in

some way. Whether with an incorrect label or misleading packaging, companies that greenwash are misrepresenting their company and their product. This dishonest practice tricks consumers, robbing them of their freedom of choice. For example, a consumer could purchase a product labeled “eco-friendly,” thinking they are supporting the environment, when in reality, the product does not conserve any resources when compared to competitors. Furthermore, when a company falsely portrays their green initiatives by greenwashing, consumers purchase these products instead of actually sustainable items. Those purchases collectively degrade the environment while providing companies with proof that they can get away with greenwashing. Because greenwashing subtracts efforts and funds from more sustainable businesses, it perpetuates climate change and also disproportionately affects low-income populations. As the “victims of climate change,” low-income individuals cannot afford to ignore climate change as high-income populations can (Messner). Therefore, climate change itself is an injustice, and because market trends like greenwashing perpetuate it, greenwashing deprives these lower-income individuals of economic justice. To restore consumer confidence and allow buyers to make fully informed decisions, the public must demand greater accountability and uniform standards in marketing practices. However, even if producer-consumer relationships improve, because the United States still operates under capitalism, companies will continue to be motivated by profit and therefore remain willing to sacrifice sustainability initiatives.

Although increased public interest in sustainability seems like an important and necessary step in protecting the planet, it can yield unforeseen consequences. One of these consequences has been Greenwashing, a practice in which companies falsely portray or emphasize the “green” nature of their product to gain buyership. This phenomenon prevents consumers from discerning whether or not the product is actually sustainable and making informed purchasing decisions.

Partially responsible for the value-action gap observed in modern consumers, greenwashing represents one part of a larger problem: the dishonesty within our economy. Consumers simply cannot act with informed morality until businesses conduct themselves with authenticity.

Although greater regulation of labeling standards and marketing practices seems like the immediate solution, increased government intervention is a mere band-aid on the bullet hole that is modern capitalism. As long as businesses are motivated by profit and invigorated by competition, environmental concerns will not be prioritized, and companies will continue to adopt a guise of sustainability to meet modern demands of eco-friendly products. Change must occur at the consumer level as well, as individuals must remember that simply buying sustainable products does not halt climate change. As Richard Wilk points out in his viewpoint essay, consumers who are genuinely concerned about the environment must not be fooled that climate change will be stopped by them “making the right shopping decisions” (Wilk).

Greenwashing only perpetuates this issue, further preventing consumers from contributing to sustainability. Unfortunately, current regulations do not demand standardization of language and packaging claims and therefore do not aid consumers. Instead, governmental policy is laden with loopholes and exceptions that allow companies to lie to consumers, committing fraud and removing consumer dollars from initiatives and businesses that are truly sustainable. If the value-action gap is to be filled, businesses must have consumers’ best interests in mind, and because most consumers have the earth’s best interest in mind, businesses would have to improve their sustainability. It is only within this system that consumers can trust corporations and truly make a difference.

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