

## Sustainable marketing dilemmas: moral, ethical, and practical in business communication perspectives

Frans Sudirjo<sup>1\*)</sup>, Carl C.G. Dizon<sup>2</sup>, Ana Rusmardiana<sup>3</sup>,  
Asep Deni<sup>4</sup>, H. Hantono<sup>5</sup>

<sup>1</sup> Department of Management, Universitas 17 Agustus 1945 Semarang  
161 Imam Bonjol Street, Semarang, Indonesia

<sup>2</sup> De La Salle University Integrated School Manila  
2401 Taft Avenue, Malate, Manila, Philippines

<sup>3</sup> Department of Industrial Engineering, Universitas Indraprasta PGRI Jakarta  
58c Nangka Street, Tanjung Barat, Southern Jakarta, Indonesia

<sup>4</sup> Department of Management, Universitas Linggabuana PGRI Sukabumi  
Pramuka II/ 10, Sukabumi, Indonesia

<sup>5</sup> Department of Management, Universitas Pelita Harapan Medan  
Lippo Plaza Medan, 6 Imam Bonjol Avenue, Medan, Indonesia

Email: frans-sudirjo@untagsmg.ac.id and; Phone Number: +62 24 8441772

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**Abstract** In recent years, corporations' sustainable marketing practices have gone beyond just selling mere products or services and present significant challenges. This study examines the moral, ethical, and practical challenges encountered by sustainable marketing, specifically from the standpoint of business communication. This research explains the notion of sustainable marketing and discerns its ethical dilemmas by examining the current body of scholarly literature. The discussion focuses on stakeholder theory, ethical consumerism, and communication theories. The study employs a qualitative research methodology, gathering data through comprehensive interviews and case analysis. The participants comprise marketing professionals, consumers, and companies that place sustainability as a top priority. The findings illustrate that organisations face many moral and ethical challenges while creating and executing sustainable marketing strategies. For example, challenges arise when trying to balance the desire for genuineness and openness and the success of marketing communications, as well as conflicts between moral evaluations and business goals. These challenges substantially impact the company's communication strategy, as they are directly connected to consumer trust and brand image. This study offers valuable insights for companies creating and implementing sustainable marketing strategies. It highlights the crucial role of managing moral and ethical factors to achieve long-term success. Moreover, the discoveries can aid policymakers and regulatory agencies formulate criteria and recommendations to foster sustainable corporate practices.

**Keywords:** consumer trust; marketing communication disruption; sustainable marketing

\*) Corresponding Author

## INTRODUCTION

Sustainable marketing has become an essential plan of action for organisations seeking to meet the increasing societal need for environmental conservation and social accountability (Bharadwaj et al., 1993; Middleton & Hawkins, 1998; Sibinovski et al., 2021). As consumers grow more conscious of the consequences their purchase choices have on the environment, corporations must find strategies to promote their products and services which are both economically feasible and morally and environmentally acceptable (Hailemariam & Erdiaw-Kwasie, 2023; Halkos & Managi, 2023; Leipold et al., 2023). The shift towards sustainable marketing methods signifies a notable break from conventional marketing strategies, traditionally emphasising immediate profits rather than long-term sustainability (Susilo, 2023). Businesses face many difficult issues as they strive to navigate the interplay between economic aims, ethical considerations, and environmental concerns in their marketing activities (Todeschini et al., 2020; Yilmaz & Baybars, 2022).

Given this situation, it is essential to examine the moral, ethical, and practical factors involved in sustainable marketing (Prasetyo et al., 2023). This entails exploring how companies convey their dedication to sustainability, their assertions' genuineness, and their marketing strategy's influence on consumer perception and behaviour (De Leon, 2019; Prasetyo et al., 2023; Suryandari & Lutviana, 2020). The significance of corporate communication in this context is of utmost importance, since it acts as the channel through which organisations can interact with their stakeholders regarding sustainability matters (Faßmann & Moss, 2016; Yee et al., 2021). This study seeks to explore the complexities of effectively communicating sustainability transparently and honestly by analysing sustainable marketing from the perspective of corporate communication. This research aims to recognise the challenges and opportunities that arise when sustainable marketing and ethical business practices intersect. This will help us gain a more comprehensive understanding of how organisations can effectively navigate the complex world of sustainable marketing.

Sustainability marketing has faced criticism for its tendency to engage in performative activism. This word refers to marketing strategies and endeavours that prioritise aesthetics and symbolism over tangible efforts to bring about real environmental or social progress (Halkos & Managi, 2023; Susilo, 2023). Instead of addressing fundamental causes or implementing substantial remedies, these activities may simply aim to enhance a brand's reputation or take advantage of emerging consumer trends (Piscicelli, 2023; Siderius & Zink, 2023). Greenwashing is a well-known instance of performative activism in environmental marketing (Boncinelli et al., 2023; Marko & Kusá, 2023; Piscicelli, 2023; Qayyum et al., 2023). Greenwashing occurs when a firm presents itself as environmentally conscious through its marketing and branding strategies despite its practices not aligning with these assertions (Qayyum et al., 2023). This may involve highlighting modest environmentally friendly initiatives or magnifying the positive effects of some products or services while disregarding significant environmental issues within the company's operations. For instance, a clothing manufacturer would engage in a marketing campaign to promote a new line of apparel that is "eco-friendly," indicating that it is made from recycled materials.

The campaign would emphasise the importance of sustainability and raise awareness about environmental issues (Marko & Kusá, 2023; Qayyum et al., 2023). Nevertheless, upon closer examination, it becomes apparent that most of the brand's products still employ environmentally harmful production methods or contribute to excessive waste and pollution throughout their lifespan. In this scenario, the marketing strategy serves as a front to conceal the brand's true environmental impact instead of fostering genuine transformation. Additional examples of performative activism in sustainability marketing involve superficial actions such as temporary price reductions or changes in product packaging that prioritise visual appeal over genuine environmental advantages (Zhang, 2022). While these efforts may initially receive positive attention, they eventually fall short in addressing the underlying challenges that contribute to environmental degradation. Sustainability marketing can generate beneficial transformation and increase consciousness on pressing issues (Susilo, 2023; Susilo & Dizon, 2023). However, companies must go beyond superficial activism and adopt comprehensive strategies that prioritise authentic sustainability practices and accountability across all aspects of their operations. Brands can only genuinely contribute to the collective effort towards a more

sustainable and equitable future only by taking tangible actions and being transparent (Qayyum et al., 2023).

Amidst a time of heightened environmental and social consciousness, sustainability marketing has emerged as a powerful influence on consumer behaviour and societal values (Susilo & Dizon, 2023). Given the pressing global challenges of climate change, resource depletion, and social inequity, firms are seeing the growing significance of integrating sustainability principles into their marketing strategy (Correia et al., 2023; Wang et al., 2023). This paradigm shift not only showcases a commitment to environmental stewardship, but it also emphasises a fundamental reconsideration of companies' role in society. This study will examine the profound impact of sustainable marketing on transforming social perspectives, behaviours, and the economy, utilising engaging illustrations.

## **METHODOLOGY**

This study utilises the case study methodology proposed by K. Yin to gain a profound understanding of intricate and multifaceted phenomena by conducting a thorough analysis of individual situations (Yin, 2009). The researcher chose instances from publicly traded organisations to examine the moral, ethical, and practical challenges in sustainable marketing and business communication. These specific cases include the achievements and difficulties of sustainable marketing strategies, enabling the researcher to get practical knowledge that connects theory and practice.

Interviews were conducted and served as a primary method for data collection in this study, with three consumers and two marketing communication officers participating. The consumer interviews aim to understand the influence of sustainable marketing messages on consumer perceptions and behaviours. Concurrently, the interviews with marketing communication officers offer comprehensive perspectives on how organisations can successfully incorporate sustainability into their communication strategy. The amalgamation of these viewpoints contributes to a thorough understanding of the intricacies and subtleties of sustainable marketing strategy (Yin, 2009).

The interview approach incorporated open-ended questions, enabling respondents to articulate their experiences, perceptions, and opinions openly. This approach is essential in confirming the themes and hypotheses derived from examining the case study. In addition, the material obtained from interviews undergoes systematic content analysis to gain a comprehensive grasp of the moral, ethical, and practical challenges associated with sustainable marketing. This methodological technique improves the trustworthiness and accuracy of the study, providing important implications for the creation and execution of sustainable marketing strategies.

## **RESULTS AND DISCUSSION**

### **Global Sustainable Marketing as a Trend**

The rise of Global Sustainable Marketing is a significant trend in today's business world, indicating a change in corporate focus from merely seeking profits to prioritising environmental and social responsibilities (Belch & Belch, 2017; Susilo, 2023; Zhou et al., 2021). Sustainable marketing requires organisations to carefully assess their products and services' environmental and social effects, which greatly resonates with consumers. Consumers are becoming more aware of the environmental consequences of their purchase choices, which allows companies that provide sustainable products and services to acquire a competitive advantage. Therefore, sustainable marketing goes beyond being a fleeting trend; it has evolved into an essential approach organisations must embrace to achieve long-term success.

RP, 33 years old, Marketing Communication officer from Multinational FMCG based in Jakarta, mentioned her awareness about the change in Marketing Communication trend, especially among Gen Z. The global shift towards sustainable marketing is visible in multiple industries, bolstering brand reputation and fostering customer loyalty for companies.

"Companies can demonstrate their commitment to environmental stewardship by taking actions such as adopting eco-friendly packaging or utilising sustainable raw materials" (RP, Personal Interview, 12 October 2023).

In her addition, progress in social media and digital marketing has opened up new channels for efficiently spreading sustainable marketing messages. These advancements enhance worldwide consumer communication, foster sustainable methods, and aid in accomplishing company sustainability objectives. In the end, sustainable marketing firmly establishes itself as a worldwide business trend, creating fresh values for both companies and customers.

Generation Z's heightened knowledge of sustainability issues signifies a notable change in consumer behaviour and priorities, distinguishing them from previous generations. Gen Z consumers, who were born during a time of fast technology progress and increasing environmental issues, are naturally more aware of how their purchases affect the globe. This population possesses a high level of knowledge regarding sustainability and actively seeks out transparent companies and organisations that uphold ethical practices. One of our respondents, TR, 21 years old, a graduate of Communications Art from a Filipino private university in Manila, mentioned his generation's awareness and choice towards tends on brand from companies that practise Sustainable Compliance, including sustainable marketing.

"Consumers' purchasing choices are progressively swayed by the extent to which a company conforms to its sustainability principles, resulting in a demand for environmentally friendly, ethically obtained products, and with a minimum environmental impact". (TR, personal interview, 16 September 2023)

Companies have been forced to reassess and modify their business models and marketing strategies to meet the demands of Gen Z, who prioritise sustainability. As a result, sustainability has become a fundamental aspect of their value proposition. This concern was validated by YTT, 38 years old, the Marketing Communication Manager from Cafe Brand in Indonesia.

" We face the situation, which Gen Z as rising consumers more demanding on environmental care products and brands. They are active in voicing their opinion and push the company to adopt this movement." (YTT, personal interview, 16 September 2023)

Furthermore, the active participation of Generation Z on digital platforms enhances their impact on environmental trends and the actions of corporations. By utilising social media, the current generation can champion sustainable habits, expose firms that neglect their environmental obligations, and disseminate knowledge about sustainable living to a broad audience. Gen Z's proficient use of digital tools to mobilise, educate, and influence their peers and older generations has transformed them into a formidable force propelling the sustainability agenda. Companies are currently facing heightened levels of accountability, as any error or mistake in their sustainability assertions can be promptly examined and disseminated through various internet platforms. As a result, the consciousness and advocacy of Generation Z customers have become a crucial element in advancing sustainable development, fostering a more accountable business environment where sustainability is not merely a choice but an essential requirement.

Global trend in sustainability marketing goes beyond standard profit-driven techniques by stressing the three bottom lines: people, planet, and profit (Ahmed et al., 2022; Correia et al., 2023; Simanjuntak et al., 2023). Businesses that match their aims with broader social and environmental goals may build a favourable brand image, increase consumer loyalty, and promote long-term profitability. Patagonia, a well-known outdoor gear brand that has pioneered sustainable marketing, is one such example. Patagonia's dedication to environmental protection and social responsibility is strongly ingrained in its brand identity, which appeals to consumers who value ethical consumption. Patagonia supports a more sustainable lifestyle by launching programs such as the "Worn Wear" program, which promotes product durability and repairability.

Furthermore, sustainable marketing has triggered a paradigm change in consumer preferences, encouraging people to make educated decisions that align with their beliefs. As customers become more sophisticated, they expect brand transparency and accountability, encouraging businesses to embrace more sustainable practices. Consider the expansion of the plant-based food sector, which has grown at an exponential rate thanks to shifting consumer

attitudes about health, animal welfare, and environmental sustainability. Beyond Meat and Impossible Foods have used sustainability marketing to pitch their plant-based products as ethical alternatives to regular meat, attracting environmentally concerned consumers looking to lessen their carbon impact.

Furthermore, sustainability marketing has the potential to shape societal norms and encourage collective action toward sustainable goals. Brands can affect substantial change on a local and global scale by leveraging their influence and resources. A powerful example is Coca-Cola's collaboration with WWF (Worldwide Fund for Nature) to solve freshwater conservation issues. Coca-Cola's "Replenish Africa Initiative" (RAIN) commits to restoring the same quantity of water consumed in its beverages across Africa. This joint endeavour solves water scarcity and highlights the transformational power of corporate-led sustainability programs in addressing urgent social concerns.

In addition to changing customer behaviour, sustainability marketing is critical in stimulating innovation and cultivating a culture of corporate responsibility. Businesses must rethink their operating methods, product design, and supply chain management to reduce environmental impact while increasing social value. Tesla, the pioneering electric car manufacturer, illustrates this philosophy via its unwavering pursuit of sustainable transportation solutions. Tesla has revolutionised the automobile industry by combining cutting-edge technology with a dedication to renewable energy, accelerating the transition to a low-carbon future.

Furthermore, sustainability marketing can increase the visibility of underrepresented populations and campaign for social justice. Brands may empower disadvantaged groups and alleviate systemic disparities by communicating inclusively and engaging with communities. The Body Shop, a cosmetics firm known for its ethical approach to animal testing and fair trade, has promoted diversity and inclusiveness in its marketing efforts. By celebrating beauty in all forms and supporting projects that promote gender equality and LGBTQ+ rights, The Body Shop has built a dedicated consumer base that is concerned about social justice.

However, it is critical to recognise the constraints and complexities of sustainable marketing. Greenwashing, the deceptive technique of fooling consumers with unfounded claims of environmental responsibility, is still a major concern in the business. Businesses must adhere to strict transparency and authenticity criteria to gain customer confidence and credibility. Furthermore, the commercialisation of sustainability runs the risk of trivialising important environmental and social challenges, turning them to marketing ploys.

Sustainability marketing is transforming society's views, habits, and corporate processes. Brands that prioritise environmental stewardship, social responsibility, and ethical consumerism may create good change and contribute to a more sustainable future. Sustainability marketing has a dramatic influence on driving innovation, encouraging consumer action, and building a culture of corporate accountability, as demonstrated by companies such as Patagonia, Beyond Meat, Coca-Cola, Tesla, and the Body Shop. As we face the difficult problems of the twenty-first century, sustainability marketing shines as a beacon of hope, guiding us toward a more egalitarian, resilient, and sustainable world.

### **The Controversy of Sustainable Marketing: Greenwashing**

Sustainable marketing has emerged as a crucial strategy for organisations seeking to tackle environmental and social issues while satisfying client needs (Qayyum et al., 2023; Simanjuntak et al., 2023). Nevertheless, beneath its outward appearance is an intricate network of tensions where ethical considerations clash with commercial objectives. This section examines the diverse debate around sustainable marketing, exploring its challenges, benefits, and a prominent example to illustrate its complexities. Sustainable marketing encompasses the principles of environmental stewardship, social accountability, and economic sustainability (Halkos & Managi, 2023; Leipold et al., 2023). It involves promoting products or services that have a minimal detrimental impact on the environment and society while still meeting the needs of both present and future generations. This strategy is consistent with the rising customer desire for environmentally conscious companies and ethical purchasing behaviours (Baldassarre et al., 2024; Moore et al., 2016).

Greenwashing has been a subject of debate among marketing communication scholars in recent years. One of the most contentious issues is greenwashing, in which

businesses falsely promote their products or operations as environmentally beneficial in order to attract conscientious consumers (Marko & Kusá, 2023). This dishonest strategy erodes confidence and dilutes the validity of actual environmental initiatives. PP, 25 years old, is one of our respondents and highlights more and more brands practising sustainable marketing in their promotion but tending to greenwash.

" More and more companies are promoting their products and services using sustainable marketing strategies to meet the rising demand for environmentally friendly options. Environmental and social responsibility are becoming more important in establishing trust and loyalty among consumers, and this trend reflects that. Greenwashing, in which businesses falsely assert that their products or operations are environmentally beneficial to provide the idea that they are committed to sustainability, is a worrying trend that has emerged simultaneously with this positive movement". (PP, personal interview, 9 August 2023)

Although sustainable marketing can bring about substantial environmental and social advancements, greenwashing undermines these endeavours by weakening customer confidence and diminishing the significance of authentic sustainability initiatives. Consumers face difficulty distinguishing between genuinely sustainable companies and those simply using the trend for marketing reasons, which could hinder the advancement towards a more sustainable economy (Boncinelli et al., 2023; Marko & Kusá, 2023).

The widespread occurrence of greenwashing emphasises the urgent requirement for increased transparency and responsibility in sustainable marketing strategies. With customers' increasing awareness and scepticism towards sustainability promises, firms that engage in greenwashing face the potential for severe backlash and harm to their reputation. In response to this issue, regulatory agencies and industry groups are intensifying their efforts to set more explicit norms and standards around the definition of authentic, sustainable marketing. Meanwhile, customers are progressively seeking third-party certifications and depending on independent audits to authenticate the sustainability assertions of firms. The dynamic nature of this changing environment indicates that a collaborative endeavour involving firms, authorities, and consumers is needed for sustainable marketing to preserve its authenticity and efficiency. The full potential of sustainable marketing in driving the worldwide move towards more sustainable consumption and production patterns can only be realised by creating an environment that promotes honesty and responsibility (Boncinelli et al., 2023; Qayyum et al., 2023; Zhang, 2022).

### **Sustainability Marketing Dilemma**

In the present era, sustainability transcends being a mere expression; it has become an ethical imperative, a business tactic, and consumer requirement. As firms progressively integrate sustainability into their branding and marketing endeavours, they must carefully maintain a delicate equilibrium. Firstly, it is essential for them to genuinely demonstrate their dedication to sustainability to meet client demands and stay competitive. However, they face the daunting task of navigating the intricate web of potential environmental and societal problems, which poses a significant obstacle (Jarosławski & Toumi, 2019).

Sustainability marketing promotes products or services that emphasise environmental or social advantages. It tries to appeal to consumers who value ethical consumerism and want to make purchases that reflect their beliefs. However, when businesses go into sustainable marketing, they confront many challenges, especially when dealing with criticism. One major concern is the potential of greenwashing, which occurs when businesses overstate or mislead customers about the environmental advantages of their products or operations. Greenwashing diminishes customer trust while also undermining real environmental efforts. Furthermore, businesses must navigate the difficult task of dealing with sustainability issues transparently while not jeopardising their brand name (Gurita, 2021; Herrero et al., 2023).

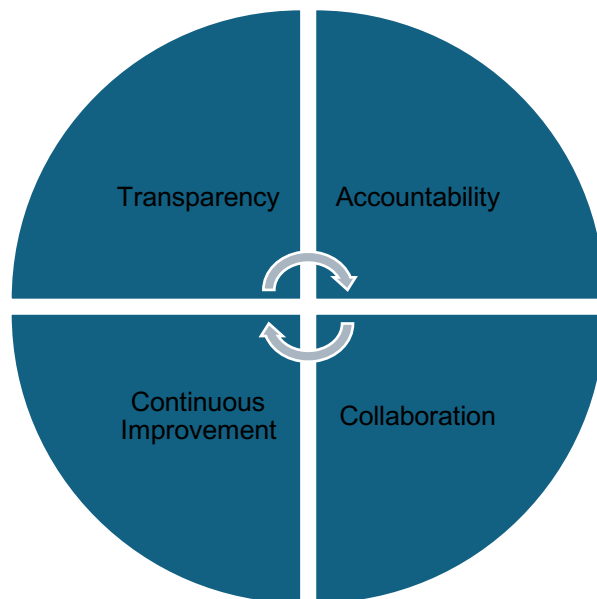
TR, our informants mentioned the Palm Oil campaign to appear more green and sustainable in their marketing action.

"One industry that has a problem with sustainable marketing is the palm oil industry. Deforestation, habitat loss, and human rights abuses, particularly in Southeast Asia, have been linked to palm oil, a multipurpose chemical utilised in numerous consumer

goods, such as food, cosmetics, and biofuels. More and more people are learning about these difficulties, which means that companies that utilise palm oil are under increasing pressure to solve sustainability concerns." (TR, personal interview, 16 September 2023)

"Consider the example of a global consumer products corporation known for its dedication to sustainability. Let us call it "EcoPro." EcoPro enthusiastically promotes the use of sustainably sourced components in their products, including palm oil. However, investigation research reveals linkages between EcoPro's palm oil suppliers and deforestation in fragile habitats, as well as labour abuse on palm oil farms. Caught in the sustainability marketing dilemma, EcoPro finds itself at a crossroads. On the other hand, it must uphold its brand image as an eco-conscious leader and address the controversy transparently"(TR, personal interview, 16 September 2023)

Conversely, it risks tarnishing its reputation and losing consumer trust if it mishandles the situation (Gregg et al., 2022; Naseem et al., 2021). To navigate the sustainability marketing dilemma effectively, companies like EcoPro must adopt a multi-faceted approach prioritising transparency, accountability, and genuine commitment to sustainability (Chen et al., 2017; Ruby et al., 2020).



**Figure 1.** Sustainable Marketing Core Value  
Source: Author Data Processed (2023)

The sustainability marketing conundrum presents substantial hurdles for businesses attempting to blend ethical messages with the reality of controversy (Figure 1). Companies may handle this problem with integrity and resilience if they prioritise openness, responsibility, cooperation, and continual development. As customers demand true sustainability promises from brands, firms such as EcoPro have the chance to set a good example and promote positive change in the marketplace.

The examination of sustainable marketing and the presence of greenwashing has significant theoretical implications for both marketing theory and sustainability practices. Firstly, it questions conventional marketing theories that largely emphasise consumer satisfaction, market share, and profitability, by incorporating the crucial aspect of ethical duty. The emergence of sustainable marketing highlights the necessity for a fundamental change in marketing theory, promoting a comprehensive strategy that includes environmental and social factors in addition to economic goals. This trend indicates that upcoming marketing strategies should not solely focus on fulfilling customer needs and preferences but should also tackle wider

societal issues, emphasising the significance of integrating sustainability concepts into the fundamental aspects of marketing philosophy (Ahmed et al., 2022; Susilo, 2023; Wang et al., 2023; Zhang, 2022).

Furthermore, the matter of greenwashing highlights the intricacies associated with effectively conveying sustainability initiatives. It reveals a deficiency in current theoretical frameworks concerning the genuineness and openness of marketing communications. There is a high occurrence of greenwashing, which highlights the necessity for creating more sophisticated frameworks that can accurately assess and guarantee the truthfulness of sustainability assertions. This involves a thorough analysis of the moral foundations of marketing operations, prompting experts to enhance theories concerning corporate social responsibility (CSR) and ethical marketing. These theoretical developments would offer more precise instructions for corporations to carry out their sustainability projects, ensuring that their marketing communications are both convincing and honest, as well as socially responsible.

Ultimately, the way consumers react to sustainable marketing and greenwashing has important consequences for our understanding of consumer behaviour theories. Due to the increasing doubt among consumers regarding sustainability promises, it is important to have a more detailed comprehension of how consumers perceive and respond to information about company sustainability initiatives. This scenario necessitates the augmentation of consumer behaviour theories to encompass the cognitive and emotional processes that impact consumers' trust and their capacity to evaluate the authenticity of sustainability claims. Gaining a deep comprehension of these forces is essential for creating successful marketing plans that can truly captivate consumers and promote a culture of sustainability. Hence, our research not only enhances theoretical debates on marketing and sustainability but also establishes the foundation for future empirical investigations focused on delving deeper into these intricate relationships.

## **CONCLUSION**

As a result, this study has examined the changing ecosystem of sustainable marketing. The insights obtained in this study underscore the nuanced ethical, moral, and practical considerations which companies must employ in pursuit of more balanced and comprehensive sustainability marketing practices. First, companies must demonstrate their commitment to fostering environmental stewardship through more concrete initiatives, specifically, utilising eco-friendly packaging and use of sustainable raw materials, among others. Moreover, the growing demand for environment-friendly products among younger generations drives companies to prioritise sustainability in their marketing strategies, which positions them to establish authenticity and accountability by balancing profit motives with ethical environmental responsibilities. Consequently, this positive movement also puts companies and organisations in a situation where they are compelled to reconcile their brand image as eco-responsible entities while transparently addressing environmental controversies. This is also accompanied by a proliferating marketing dilemma known as greenwashing, where companies falsely claim themselves to be environmentally responsible entities.

This significant problem of greenwashing emphasises its impact on marketing theory, ethical company conduct, and consumer actions. Adopting sustainable marketing signifies a substantial change in organisations' attitudes to their interaction with consumers and the environment, promoting a more cohesive and morally accountable marketing framework. Nevertheless, the widespread problem of greenwashing highlights the immediate requirement for increased openness, responsibility, and regulatory supervision in sustainability assertions to maintain the credibility of sustainable marketing endeavours and safeguard consumer confidence. The theoretical implications described in this study suggest the need to reassess conventional marketing theories, focusing on integrating sustainability and ethical issues into marketing strategies. Furthermore, the occurrence of greenwashing requires the creation of more stringent theoretical frameworks for evaluating the genuineness of marketing communications. Additionally, the evolving dynamics of consumer behaviour towards sustainability claims necessitate a more profound comprehension of how individuals perceive and assess such information.

Scholars, practitioners, and policymakers must work together to improve and broaden the theoretical foundations of sustainable marketing. This will ensure that it effectively promotes a



more sustainable and fair global economy. This research enhances the academic discussion on sustainable marketing and provides practical guidance for organisations aiming to connect their operations with sustainability standards. In conclusion, by tackling the difficulties and embracing the possibilities offered by sustainable marketing, we can create a future where commercial prosperity and environmental responsibility are closely linked.

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