

# Celebrity Footprint in Greenwashing

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## **Abstract**

*This study aims to find out, if a credible celebrity may impact the positioning of fake green claims. Researcher hypothesises that expertise, trustworthiness and attractiveness positively relates to greenwashing. The data was collected using convenient sampling from the respondents of India. Sample consisted of 175 respondents of India. The data was analysed using regression analysis through SPSS. Results suggest that expertise, trustworthiness and attractiveness positively relates to greenwashing. Trustworthiness is not a significant predictor of greenwashing but expertise and attractiveness are significant predictors too. Attractiveness is most prominent factor affecting the greenwash behaviour. From the point of view of ethical behaviour, consumers can be befooled on the name of greenness by using the persuasive power of celebrities. This not only downgrades the consumption of green products by the consumer, but also harms the companies who rightfully sell green products. The present study is one of the first, at least to the author's knowledge to empirically examine and confirm the influence of source credibility (expertise, trustworthiness and attractiveness) on greenwashing.*

**Keywords:** Green marketing, Celebrity endorsement, Greenwashing, Sustainable marketing

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## **Introduction**

Do you think the company is fabricating the green claim? If yes, you are being trapped in greenwashing facade. 'Green' is the new black. People these days are highly concerned about the environment and this can be seen in their concern about the greenness of the product. Brands are using this cue to increase their market share (do Paço and Reis, 2012; Parguel et al., 2015). The effect of greenness can be seen in the form of green advertisements also (Ottman, 1993) which contain a number of green claims. The darker side of the green advertisement is greenwashing which has its origin in 1986 by New York environmentalist Jay Westerveld. He exhibited that the save water drive of hoteliers is nothing but an illusion for green image. Encouraging customers to use towels more than once but not doing any effort to actually save the environment is an act of deception. Greenwash enters the arena when consumers are deceived through deluding environmental claims that are either false, omit important information or combination of these tactics (Carlson et al., 1993). Green claims with no specific information about its validity are nothing more than blinding the consumers with open eyes. Advertisements are major source of greenwashing, wherein the

researcher expects that celebrities are also used as tools for making the claim more effective and sound more persuasive.

Celebrities are signed in endorsements as a part of strategic manoeuvre for gaining extra edge in the competitive advertisement world. Using the recognition of the celebrities, this billion dollar industry (Kambitsis, 2002) creates a position in the mind of the consumer. Previous studies reveal that endorsements by celebrities have high attention gaining capacity, lofty recall value, and considerable impact on purchase intention of the consumer (Atkins & Block, 1983; Ohanian, 1991; Sherman, 1985; Kaikati, 1987; Belch and Belch, 2001; Walker and Dubitsky, 1994). With advent of green movement, it has become more of a trend to infuse green products into the market with green celebrity advertising as an integral part of integrated communication strategy.

Looking at the hidden aspect, many brands try to exploit green marketing, to stand out in the advertising clutter as this has become way of attracting the environmentally concerned consumer (Chang 2011; Chen & Chang 2013). The terms such as 100% natural, eco-friendly, no chemicals, pure, etc have not been lawfully defined by any authority. This has created vagueness in the explanation of the environmental features of the product in the advertisement. As corporate green claims have mushroomed, consumers have become skeptical about the authenticity of these claims (Lyon & Montgomery, 2015). Greenwashing has grown into an epidemic as exclaimed by Hsu (2011). Moreover, consumers reckon on the corporate advertising largely, for making decision regarding green purchase, on the contrary greenwashing is hampering their trust and confidence on the advertisements (Hamann & Kapelus, 2004). This red mark on the green claims of the firms directly affects the green market, not only of those companies who mislead consumer, but also of those who are actually green firms, selling green products.

Researchers suggest that credibility of a celebrity influences advertisement effectiveness which is measured by attitude of consumer towards advertisements, attitude of consumer towards brands and purchase intention (Bhatt, Jayswal & Patel, 2013). Furthermore, effectiveness of communication can be elevated by taking the advantage of celebrity endorsements (Sherman, 1985). Empirical evidences suggest that celebrity endorsements produce more favourable impact on the consumer as compared to non-celebrity endorsements (Atkins & Block, 1983). Hamish Pringle (2004) asserts that three macro factors make celebrity endorsements a valid strategy for promotion: Increase in interactivity between brands and customers; Consumer has control over the messages they receive with the help of advertisement filters, this phenomenon is termed as “Era of Consent”; Media fragmentation and commercialisation is at its towering heights.

Greenpeace book on Greenwash (1992) introduced the concept of Greenwash to the global audience and remarked that many companies just act green but actually, do not behave green. They stressed that many companies who speak against polluting water, air and land, are themselves indulged in the activities that harm environment. These companies deploy such effective communication strategies to make people believe the fact that they are fulfilling their responsibilities towards environment, though in real they are abusing earth. One of the

earliest cases of greenwashing can be attributed to Shell, the company which gave the world, some of the best greenwashed advertisements, at the same time invested in high carbon fuels as reported by Greenpeace organization in its report Greenwash +20 in 2012. In India, Nestle was reported to be indulging in greenwashing in baby food segment by not following the provisions of The Infant Milk Substitute, Feeding Bottles and Infant Foods Act, 1992 as reported by Breast Feeding Promotion Network of India (BPNI) in March 2012.

This study aims to find out, if credibility factor of the celebrity impacts greenwashing. Researcher hypothesizes that credible celebrity may play an important role in misleading and deceiving the consumer about the environmental features of the product. Celebrities may deploy their eminence to persuade consumers about the firm's environmental concerns.

## **Conceptual background**

### ***Green Advertisement***

There has been vast increase in the numbers of environmentally conscious consumers (Royne et al., 2016). This segment calls for a potential promotional campaign directed to satisfy the needs of information of green consumer segment. Green advertisement may prove to be a link between environmental concerns of the consumers and environmental behaviour performed by them (Royne et al., 2016). With increase in the concern about environment, even promotional activities have taken a green turn. According to Banerjee, Gulas & Iyer (1995) green advertisement is one which covers one or more of the following criteria:

- An advertisement which explicitly/implicitly shows the relationship between product/service and the surrounding environment.
- An advertisement which promotes a green lifestyle with or without emphasizing the product/service.
- Exhibits the environmental friendly image of the firm.

Green advertisements may help the corporate to earn the trust of the consumer. It includes ecological, environmentally sustainable, or nature-friendly messages specially targeted to ecologically concerned consumers. Green advertisement messages generally focus on the green features of the product, prices and value of money, availability and accessibility of the product, availability and accessibility of the information (Karna et al., 2003; Leonidou et al., 2013; Kumar, 2014). It aims at developing consumer understanding of green products, improving their product knowledge and offering them green product experience (Kumar, 2017). Green advertisements help in making the consumer aware about the sustainable efforts of the brand. Green communication will enhance the brand image as well as help in creating potential green product adopters (Royne et al., 2016).

### ***Greenwashing***

Green advertising being the bright side of the green movement is accompanied by greenwashing, a dark secret of green communication, which no more remains a secret. The term greenwashing coined by New York environmentalist Jay Westerveld in 1986 was

modelled from the word whitewash. Greenwashing refers to the practice of companies claiming to be functioning green but may not be able to validate it (Parguel et al., 2011; Chen & Chang, 2013). Greenwashing is deliberately exercising deception to whitewash consumers towards the false or vague green claim towards the product or corporate image. Greenwash vandalizes the demand of the product by confusing the consumer about their buying intention (Pomeroy & Johnson 2009). Even many consumers believe that the green claim is nothing but a marketing strategy to allure (Lyon & Maxwell, 2011). Greenwashing is serious issue as this may impact the trust of consumers towards real green products (Polonsky et al., 2010). Studies have exclaimed that companies need to decline the greenwash behaviour to escalate consumers' green brand equity which further depends upon green brand image and green satisfaction (Chen et al., 2016). Sustainability reporting has become an essential part of green corporate culture. Brands are trying to take the advantage of green consumer upsurge by misleading the consumer about the sustainable endeavours partially or wholly. Greenwashing squanders the soul of the green consumerism as well as brutally vandalizes the ethical grounds of effective communication. Consumers have largely become incredulous towards green claims made by brands in the green advertisements (Aji and Sutikno, 2015).

### ***Seven sins of greenwashing***

TerraChoice in 2010 conducted a research on the ways that a consumer can be deceived by a company and concluded the report by seven sins of greenwashing to aware the customer:

- *Sin of hidden trade-off*: This sin is committed when the claim advocates the greenness of the product based on narrow sets of attributes without attention to other environmental issues.
- *Sin of no proof*: This sin is committed when the claim regarding greenness is not substantiated by the availability of supporting information or by reliable third party certification.
- *Sin of vagueness*: This sin is committed when the claim is poorly defined or it is so broad that it misleads the customer.
- *Sin of irrelevance*: This sin is committed when the claim may be true but not important as well as helpful in the recent context, for a consumer who prefers environment-friendly products.
- *Sin of lesser of two evils*: This sin is committed when the claim may be true within the product category, but may distract the consumer from the overall environmental impact of the category.
- *Sin of fibbing*: This sin is committed when the claim is absolutely false.
- *Sin of worshipping false labels*: This sin is committed when fake labels or fake third party endorsements are used by the product.

### ***Celebrity Endorsement***

Celebrities are used in advertisements as they have the power to influence the decision of the consumer up to some extent. Celebrity is any individual who enjoys public recognition and uses the same by appearing with the good in an advertisement (McCracken, 1989). A

celebrity endorser might be an actor, athlete, businessperson, entertainer, military leader, model, politician or singer (Friedman & Friedman, 1979; McCracken, 1989). Celebrity endorsements are prominent marketing communication strategies which have been used since nineteenth century (Erdogan, 1999). Initially, it was used for traditional branding (Erdogan, 1999). Its scope gradually widened to political marketing (Chou 2014, 2015), health marketing and marketing for non-governmental organisations (NGOs; Jackson 2008; Wheeler 2009; Young & Miller 2015). Statistical evidences show that every fourth or fifth advertisements opt for celebrity endorsement strategy with percentage in India as high as 24% (Crutchfield, 2010; Knoll & Matthes, 2016). Getting attention requires controlled as well automatic process, both of which are influenced by celebrity endorsements (Kahneman, 1973). Social meanings associated with celebrity may influence their appealing factor (McCracken, 1989; Carlson & Donovan, 2008).

### ***Source Credibility***

Source credibility theory is very important domain in the field of celebrity endorsement research. Source credibility refers to those positive characteristics of the communicator that affect the receiver's acceptance of the message as exclaimed by Ohanian (1990). The theory states that celebrities perceived to be credible, influence the attitude of consumer towards advertisement. Theory believes that credible celebrity impacts the attitude towards product also. Celebrities provide publicity and testimony for a product or service (Dyson & Turco, 1998). Using a credible spokesperson amplifies the persuasive ability of the message to be communicated (Ohanion, 1990). Source credibility rests on two models as promulgated by Ohanian (1990): Source Credibility Model (Hovland et al., 1953) and Source Attractiveness Model (McGuire, 1985). Hovland and his associates in their landmark study analysed that expertise and trustworthiness influence the perceived credibility of the endorser. Genesis of source attractiveness model is attributed to socio-psychological model of source valence.

- ***Expertise and Greenwashing***

Hovland et al. (1953) defines expertise as the “extent to which a communicator is perceived to be a source of valid assertions and refers to the knowledge, experience or skills possessed by an endorser”. Purchase behaviour of the consumer is also governed by the expertise of the endorser (Friedman & Friedman, 1979). Whitehead (1968) referred to trait of expertise as competence and Berlo et al., (1969) defined it as qualification. Expert source exhibits much greater influence than non-expert on the consumer (Crano, 1970; Ohanian, 1990). Change in attitude of a consumer is also impacted by source's perceived expertise (Mills & Harvey, 1972; Ross, 1973; Horai et al., 1974; Maddux & Rogers, 1980). Ohanian (1990) states that perceived expertise of the endorser plays more important role as compared to other two dimensions i.e. trustworthiness and attractiveness. Ohanian (1990) uses the terms like expert, experienced, knowledgeable, qualified and skilled to measure expertise. Expertise is said to be a validating factor for celebrity endorsements when it comes to persuading the consumer, similarly the researcher assumes it to be a predictor of greenwashing also. In the context of influence of the expertise on the consumer, this study argues that expertise of celebrities would positively influence greenwashing and propose the following hypothesis:



H<sub>1</sub>: Expertise of the celebrities positively relates to greenwashing.

- ***Trustworthiness and Greenwashing***

Trustworthiness is defined as honesty, believability and integrity of the endorser (Erdogan, 1999). Effectiveness of the communication message increases if endorser is perceived as trustworthy (Ohanion, 1990). Trustworthiness is an indispensable trait while ascertaining the credibility of the of the celebrity endorser. Ohanion (1990) states that trust is the level of consumer's confidence and acceptance of the message of the spokesperson. Source's trustworthiness has the mushrooming effect on the persuasiveness of the message to be communicated (Miller & Baseheart, 1969). A trustworthy source is always persuasive, whether expert or not in the field of endorsed product or not (Ohanion, 1990). Ohanion (1990) uses the terms dependable, reliable, honest, sincere and trustworthy to measure trustworthiness. Trustworthiness increases the believability of the celebrity endorsement, thereby increasing the probability of believing the fake green claim too. Thus, this study argues that trustworthy celebrities positively influence greenwashing and implies the following hypothesis:

H<sub>2</sub>: Trustworthiness of celebrities positively relates to greenwashing.

- ***Attractiveness and Greenwashing***

The term attractiveness has been elucidated as physical attractiveness (Baker & Churchill, 1977; Patzer, 1983; Caballero & Soloman, 1984). Statistical evidences suggest that physical attractiveness works as cue in forming judgement about other person (Baker & Churchill, 1977; Chaiken, 1979; Joseph, 1982; Kahle & Homer, 1985). This external trait works as an attention gainer to the consumer. Joseph (1982) remarked that attractive communicator is more liked and have significantly more positive impact associated with the product. Escalating the attractiveness of the source in the endorsement intensifies the positive attitude change (Simon, Berkowitz, & Moyer 1970; Kahle & Homer 1985). Ohanion (1990) uses the traits like attractive, classy, beautiful, elegant and sexy to measure attractiveness. Attractiveness may create a positive cue about the fake green claim as it aids in forming judgements about the endorsement. Hence, this study argues that attractive celebrity would positively influence greenwashing and proposes the following hypothesis:

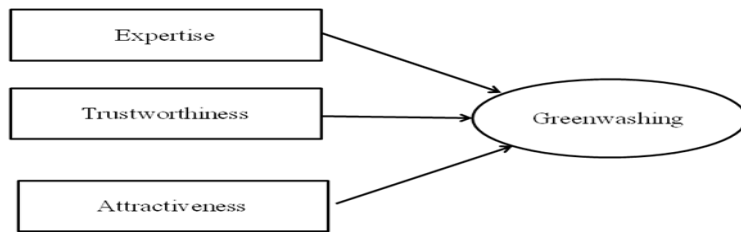
H<sub>3</sub>: Attractiveness of celebrities positively relates to greenwashing.

## **METHODS**

### **Sample**

The research object of this study focuses on residents of India who know about advertisements of any kind. Convenient sampling method is applied as the sampling method. This study sent 200 questionnaires to the consumers who were sampled. There are 175 valid questionnaires, and the effective response rate is 87.5 %. It can be observed that a large number of respondents belong to the age group of 40 and above (28%) with mean age 29 years. Of all the respondents, 56.6% were males and 43.4% were female respondents.

**Figure1.** Proposed conceptual model



## Measures

The study refers to previous literatures to design questionnaire items on expertise, trustworthiness, attractiveness (Ohanion, 1990) and greenwashing (Laufer 2003; Horiuchi & Schuchard, 2009). This study measures the questionnaire items by means of “five-point Likert scale from 1 to 5” rating from strongly disagree to strongly agree. The Cronbach’s alpha value of 0.771, indicates that the internal consistency of the scale is satisfactory. The Cronbach’s alpha values are in the acceptable range of 0.5–1 (Field, 2009). In addition, the validity of the instrument was also tested using Kaiser–Meyer–Olkin (KMO) and Bartlett’s test of sphericity that came out to be 0.767 and was above the minimum value of 0.50. The KMO value above 0.50 establishes the sampling adequacy criteria (Kaiser, 1974; Field, 2009).

## RESULT

The objective of the study was to understand the relationship between dimensions of source credibility model and greenwashing. Expertise, trustworthiness and attractiveness were taken as predictor variables respectively, with greenwashing as outcome variable. Table I below shows the correlation matrix of the study variables. The correlation values support the hypothesized relations between independent and dependent variables. All the important variables vis-à-vis expertise, trustworthiness and attractiveness are positively related to greenwashing. In order to further confirm the results, regression analysis is administered on the data.

### *Regression Analysis*

Three models were tested in the study. In Model 1, greenwashing was regressed on expertise. Pearson’s correlation coefficient of 0.184 shows positive relationship between expertise and greenwashing. A significant regression equation was found between expertise and greenwashing ( $F_{(1,173)} = 6.038, p < 0.05$ ), with an  $R^2$  of 0.034, indicating 3.4% variation in greenwashing can be explained by the model containing only expertise. Thus,  $H_1$  is supported. In model 2, greenwashing was regressed on trustworthiness. Pearson’s correlation coefficient of 0.136 shows positive relationship between trustworthiness and greenwashing. A regression equation was found not to be significant between trustworthiness and greenwashing ( $F_{(1,173)} = 3.243, p > 0.05$ ), with an  $R^2$  of 0.018, indicating 1.8% variation in greenwashing can be explained by the model containing only trustworthiness. Thus,  $H_2$  is supported. Pearson’s correlation coefficient of 0.390 shows positive relationship between attractiveness and greenwashing. A significant regression equation was found between

attractiveness and greenwashing ( $F_{(1,173)} = 31.043, p < 0.05$ ), with an  $R^2$  of 0.152, indicating 15.2% variation in greenwashing can be explained by the model containing only attractiveness. Thus,  $H_3$  is supported. Table II shows linear regression analysis testing.

**Table I: Correlation Matrix**

Variables	1	2	3	4	5	6
<b>1. Gender</b>	-					
<b>2. Age</b>	-0.154*	-				
<b>3. Expertise</b>	-0.002	0.151*	-			
<b>4.Trustworthiness</b>	-0.015	-0.003	0.184*	-		
<b>5. Attractiveness</b>	0.252**	-0.135	0.136	0.450**	-	
<b>6. Greenwashing</b>	-0.084	-0.015	0.390**	0.459**	0.345**	-

Notes: \* $p < 0.05$ ; \*\* $p < 0.01$

**Table II: Linear regression Analysis Table**

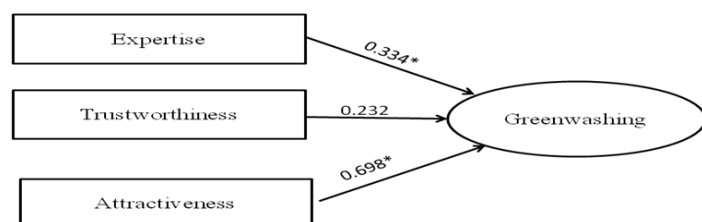
Model	R	$\beta$	P-value	N
<b>1</b>	0.184	0.334	0.015	175
<b>2</b>	0.136	0.232	0.073	175
<b>3</b>	0.390	0.698	0.000	175

Dependent variable: Greenwashing; Independent variable: Model 1(Expertise), Model 2 (Trustworthiness), and Model 3 (Attractiveness)

## DISCUSSION

Oodles of money are spent on the celebrities to endorse the product as it is believed that they possess the power of persuasion (Escalus, 2004). Previous study indicates that celebrity infuses the brand with favourable meanings and moreover, credible celebrity endorsers positively impact the attitude towards brand (Dwivedi et al., 2015) which became the base of our study that they may mislead the consumer too. Green has overpowered the consumers' thought, making it profitable venture for almost every brand. In this scenario, green advertisement is the tool which promotes the green thought. Greenwashing popped up as the other side of the coin, alluring consumers with the false green claims. Theoretical evidences suggest that celebrity endorsement impacts the green endorsements taking into the account the type of the product (Eren-Erdogmus et al., 2016). The objective of the study was to determine whether source credibility dimensions are predictor of greenwashing. Study results provided support to all general hypotheses taken.

Figure 2: Overall Result



Notes: \* $p < 0.05$



The results showed that expertise and attractiveness significantly and positively influence greenwashing. These results connote that consumers can be deceived or greenwashed, if the celebrity endorser is expert, and/or attractive in the given field. Attractiveness came out to be the most prominent trait of endorser impacting greenwashing, followed by expertise. This exhibits the fact that more attractive the endorser, more impact she/he will have on the attitude of consumer towards advertising brand (Sallam and Wahid, 2012), which may increase the chance of getting deceived through fake green claim. Ohanion (1990) exclaimed expertise to possess more persuasive power in consumer decision making it a valid inducer of greenwashed claim. Trustworthiness was found out to be positively related to greenwashing but not a significant predictor of the same in the study. Current outcome suggests that may be some other factors at play along with trustworthiness which must be considered or this could be attributed to small size of the sample. Another reason could be people believe that trustworthy celebrity may not deceive them. These results indicate that source credibility influences greenwash behaviour and prior researches have shown greenwashing contributes to the green consumer confusion (Chen & Chang, 2012) and by employing celebrities who are considered to be attractive, trustworthy and expert, brand may create confusion about the green claim and thus indulge in greenwashing.

## **IMPLICATIONS**

Present study adds to the literature that dimensions of source credibility increases the probability of believing the fake green claim. Brands on the other hand may use credibility of a celebrity to persuade the consumer about the greenness of the product, and wallow in any of the seven sins of greenwashing (Terra Choice, 2009). From the point of view of ethical behaviour, consumers must not be befooled on the name of greenness by using the persuasive power of celebrities. This not only downgrades the consumption of green products by the consumer, but also harms the companies who rightfully sell green products. Current outcome suggest attractiveness to be the most significant among others when it comes to persuading the consumer. This deepens the insights that celebrity may be credible in terms of attractiveness, expertise or trustworthiness but, endorsed product must be carefully scrutinized in reference with the claims shown in the advertisements. Stringent laws and regulations must be made by required authorities to reduce the practice of greenwashing, especially in developing countries like India. Strict action should be taken against corporate indulging in greenwashing behaviour as well as against the celebrity endorser, who being in the position of influencing many hearts used his persuasive power to greenwash.

## **Limitations and future research directions**

The limitations of this research were primarily related to the generalizability of the findings as the study has been conducted in the state of Uttarakhand, India. Future research can be conducted on the by replicating this study in different countries as well as cross country comparisons would also be interesting to find out. Secondly, convenience sampling was used, using a limited sample size which might bias the research towards certain types of respondents. Thirdly, no particular celebrity was used as a part of the study and only general

connotations are made by the researcher. Future research might attempt to determine the effect of any particular celebrity or any particular industry for more specific results.

Additionally, celebrities from different fields may result in different outcomes and comparative study can also be conducted to determine the effect of various celebrities on Greenwashing. Additional research might attempt to identify moderating or mediating variables that may impact the relation between source credibility facets and greenwashing. It would be interesting to investigate the reason for insignificant relation between trustworthiness and greenwashing. Further, it would be fascinating to know why attractiveness came out to be the major predictor of greenwashing.

## Conclusion

Celebrities have been widely used in green advertisements to promote products as they are presumed to be the reason for attention, recall and up to some extent influence purchase intent also. Through this study, we indicate that credible celebrity may influence greenwashing. Narrowing down, this research illustrates expertise and attractiveness of celebrities, somehow helps the companies in misleading the consumer about the fake green claim shown in the advertisement. This serious issue not only harms consumers as their trust is at the stake, even authentic sustainable efforts of companies are squandered. Claims made in advertisements should be subject to grilling, especially when they are made by famous faces of the society. People need a role model to imitate or look up to for inspiration, celebrities fulfil this need for them. Enhanced use of celebrities in delicate issues such as fake claims about the greenness of the product needs more research and awareness to the general public. When a celebrity who is an attractive personality or possesses a trustworthy identity or an expert or combination of all three, speaks up for a something, general public give credence to it, whether it is a fake green claim. We suggest the use of celebrity endorsements should take place with a peculiar eye after probing the green claims made about the brand.

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