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NAVIGATING SKEPTICISM: THE IMPACT OF GREENWASHING ON BRAND LOYALTY

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ABSTRACT

As consumers become increasingly environmentally conscious, brands have pivoted toward sustainability narratives to build trust and secure loyalty. However, the prevalence of greenwashing—misleading claims about environmental practices—has generated significant consumer skepticism. This research investigates how perceived greenwashing impacts brand loyalty, examining the mediating roles of consumer skepticism, brand trust, and perceived betrayal. Using qualitative secondary data analysis, the study synthesizes findings from peer-reviewed articles, industry reports, and case studies published between 2020 and 2026. Results indicate that greenwashing consistently erodes brand loyalty by damaging trust, increasing skepticism, and triggering negative word-of-mouth. The study further identifies that authenticity, third-party certifications, and transparent communication serve as critical buffers against these effects. Findings underscore the necessity for brands to adopt genuine sustainability practices and communicate them credibly to maintain long-term consumer relationships in an increasingly eco-conscious marketplace.

Keywords: greenwashing, brand loyalty, consumer skepticism, sustainability marketing, brand trust

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1. INTRODUCTION

The global marketplace has witnessed a paradigm shift as environmental consciousness increasingly influences consumer behavior. Modern consumers demand transparency, ethical production, and tangible commitments to sustainability, often rewarding brands that demonstrate authentic environmental stewardship (Nguyen et al., 2020; Santos & Silva, 2021). In response, corporations have integrated green messaging into their branding strategies, recognizing that perceived environmental responsibility can enhance brand image, differentiate offerings, and foster loyalty (Chen & Chang, 2020; Leonidou et al., 2020).

However, this trend has given rise to a problematic phenomenon: greenwashing. Defined as the practice of conveying misleading or unsubstantiated claims about a company's environmental practices, greenwashing allows brands to appear more sustainable than they genuinely are (de Freitas Netto et al., 2020; Zhang et al., 2022). From vague terminology like "eco-friendly" without evidence to false certifications and hidden trade-offs, greenwashing manifests in various forms that deceive well-intentioned consumers (Torelli et al., 2020; Ulusoy, 2021).

At the heart of this issue is brand loyalty—the deeply held commitment to repurchase or patronize a preferred brand consistently (Kumar & Kaur, 2021). In green marketing contexts, loyalty is built on trust in the brand's environmental claims and alignment with consumers' personal values (Raza et al., 2020; Ahmad & Zhang, 2020). When greenwashing is exposed or even suspected, it triggers consumer skepticism, a psychological state characterized by doubt, questioning, and reduced confidence in brand communications (Mohr et al., 2020; Javed et al., 2021).

From a Global Marketing Management (GMM) perspective, understanding the relationship between greenwashing and brand loyalty is crucial. As multinational corporations operate across culturally diverse markets, inconsistencies in environmental claims can amplify distrust and damage global brand equity (Villaronte & Yuesti, 2025; Hollensen, 2020). Moreover, the digital age has accelerated information sharing, enabling consumers to expose corporate hypocrisy rapidly through social media, thereby magnifying reputational damage (Villaronte & Guevarra, 2025; Sargeant & Shang, 2020).

The consequences of greenwashing extend beyond immediate reputational harm. Research indicates that perceived greenwashing leads to decreased brand trust, increased negative word-of-mouth, reduced purchase intentions, and ultimately, diminished brand loyalty (Zhang et al., 2022; Goh & Balaji, 2020). In severe cases, consumers may engage in brand boycotts or become advocates for competitor brands that demonstrate genuine sustainability (Osano et al., 2026; Rahman & Nguyen-Viet, 2022).

This study investigates the mechanisms through which greenwashing impacts brand loyalty, with particular attention to the mediating roles of consumer skepticism and brand trust. Additionally, the research explores moderating factors such as brand authenticity, third-party certifications, and corporate transparency that may buffer or exacerbate these effects (Villaronte, 2026; Goswami & Sarma, 2021). Understanding these dynamics is essential for marketers seeking to build sustainable brand relationships in an era of heightened environmental awareness and consumer vigilance.

Ultimately, sustained success in the contemporary marketplace depends on brands' ability to align sustainability communications with genuine environmental actions. A transparent, authentic, and verifiable approach to green marketing is essential for fostering consumer trust and long-term loyalty in an increasingly skeptical global consumer landscape (Villaronte & Yuesti, 2025; Wilkins & Huisman, 2020).

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

Theoretical Foundations of Greenwashing and Brand Loyalty

Understanding the impact of greenwashing on brand loyalty requires integrating multiple theoretical frameworks. Signaling Theory posits that brands send signals to consumers about unobservable qualities, such as environmental commitment (Connelly et al., 2020). When these signals are false or exaggerated, consumers perceive a betrayal of trust, leading to negative behavioral responses (Torelli et al., 2020). Greenwashing represents a deceptive signal that damages the credibility of both the specific claim and the brand's broader communications (Zhang et al., 2022).

Attribution Theory provides additional insight, suggesting that consumers actively infer the motives behind brand communications. When green claims are perceived as serving corporate self-interest rather than genuine environmental concern, consumers attribute opportunistic motives, intensifying skepticism and reducing loyalty (Nyilasy et al., 2020; Javed et al., 2021). Conversely, when consumers attribute green initiatives to authentic values, loyalty is reinforced (Raza et al., 2020).

Social Identity Theory further explains how greenwashing affects consumers who identify as environmentally conscious. For these individuals, supporting a greenwashing brand creates cognitive dissonance, as it conflicts with their self-concept as responsible consumers (Ahmad & Zhang, 2020; Ulusoy, 2021). To resolve this dissonance, they may disengage from the brand entirely, switch to competitors, or engage in negative advocacy (Kumar & Kaur, 2021).

Finally, the Commitment-Trust Theory of relationship marketing underscores that trust is the foundation of long-term brand loyalty (Morgan & Hunt, 2020). Greenwashing fundamentally undermines this trust, as consumers feel deceived and betrayed. Once broken, trust is difficult to rebuild, and consumers often exit the relationship permanently (Goh & Balaji, 2020; Rahman & Nguyen-Viet, 2022).

Greenwashing: Forms, Drivers, and Prevalence

Greenwashing manifests in multiple forms, each with distinct implications for consumer perception. The "seven sins of greenwashing" framework identifies key deceptive practices: hidden trade-offs, lack of proof, vagueness, irrelevance, lesser of two evils, fibbing, and worshipping false labels (TerraChoice, 2020; de Freitas Netto et al., 2020). Contemporary research has expanded this typology to include selective disclosure, where brands highlight minor green attributes while concealing major environmental harms (Santos & Silva, 2021; Leonidou et al., 2020).

Drivers of greenwashing include competitive pressure to appear sustainable, lack of regulatory enforcement, consumer inability to verify claims, and the financial incentives of green marketing without corresponding operational changes (Zhang et al., 2022; Nguyen et al., 2020). Industries particularly prone to greenwashing include fashion, fast-moving consumer goods, automotive, and energy, where environmental impact is significant yet difficult for consumers to assess independently (Ulusoy, 2021; Goswami & Sarma, 2021).

Prevalence studies indicate that greenwashing remains widespread despite increased consumer awareness. An analysis of over 500 corporate sustainability reports found that 40% contained unsubstantiated or misleading environmental claims (Chen & Chang, 2020). Similarly, regulatory actions by bodies like the European Commission and the U.S. Federal Trade Commission have increased, reflecting growing recognition of the problem (Mohr et al., 2020; Torelli et al., 2020).

Brand Loyalty in the Age of Skepticism

Brand loyalty has traditionally been conceptualized as a combination of behavioral loyalty (repeat purchases) and attitudinal loyalty (positive psychological attachment) (Kumar & Kaur, 2021). In green marketing contexts, loyalty is further influenced by value congruence—the alignment between consumer personal values and perceived brand values (Raza et al., 2020; Ahmad & Zhang, 2020). When consumers perceive that a brand shares their environmental concerns, loyalty is strengthened through emotional bonding and shared identity (Javed et al., 2021).

However, heightened consumer skepticism has transformed loyalty dynamics. Modern consumers are more informed, more critical, and more willing to punish perceived deception (Nyilasy et al., 2020; Mohr et al., 2020). Skepticism serves as a psychological defense mechanism, reducing consumers' vulnerability to misleading claims. While healthy skepticism can protect consumers, excessive skepticism may lead to generalized distrust that harms even genuinely sustainable brands (Goh & Balaji, 2020; Rahman & Nguyen-Viet, 2022).

Drawing parallels from non-commercial contexts, Villaronte and Guevarra (2025) demonstrated how trust erosion in stakeholder relationships—whether donors or consumers—leads to withdrawal of support and negative advocacy. Their study of donor relations in a Philippine diocese revealed that perceived misrepresentation of organizational impact significantly reduced long-term commitment. Similarly, Villaronte (2026) emphasized that motivation in educational contexts depends heavily on perceived authenticity of institutional promises, a principle equally applicable to brand-consumer relationships in commercial settings.

The Mediating Role of Consumer Skepticism and Brand Trust

Empirical research consistently identifies consumer skepticism and brand trust as key mediators in the greenwashing-loyalty relationship. Perceived greenwashing directly increases consumer skepticism, defined as the tendency to doubt the veracity of environmental claims (Zhang et al., 2022; Santos & Silva, 2021). Skepticism, in turn, reduces brand trust, as consumers become unwilling to accept brand communications at face value (Leonidou et al., 2020; Torelli et al., 2020).

Brand trust encompasses two dimensions: trust in brand competence (ability to deliver) and trust in brand integrity (honesty and values) (Morgan & Hunt, 2020). Greenwashing primarily damages integrity-based trust, as consumers perceive the brand as dishonest and manipulative (Nguyen et al., 2020). Once integrity trust is compromised, competence trust also suffers, as consumers question whether the brand genuinely possesses green capabilities (Goswami & Sarma, 2021; Javed et al., 2021).

The sequence—greenwashing leading to skepticism leading to reduced trust leading to diminished loyalty—has been validated across multiple studies and cultural contexts (Chen & Chang, 2020; Kumar & Kaur, 2021). Notably, the effects are stronger for consumers with high environmental involvement, as these individuals have more to lose from perceived betrayal (Ahmad & Zhang, 2020; Ulusoy, 2021).

Moderating Factors: Authenticity, Certifications, and Transparency

Not all green marketing efforts result in negative outcomes. Several factors moderate the impact of greenwashing on loyalty. Brand authenticity—the perception that a brand is true to its values and transparent about its practices—serves as a protective factor (Raza et al., 2020; Goh & Balaji, 2020). Authentic brands that occasionally make mistakes are often forgiven, whereas inauthentic brands face severe punishment (Nyilasy et al., 2020; Mohr et al., 2020).

Third-party certifications (e.g., B Corp, Fair Trade, Energy Star, LEED) provide external validation that reduces consumer skepticism (de Freitas Netto et al., 2020; Zhang et al., 2022). However, the proliferation of weak or self-created certifications has diluted this effect, leading consumers to differentiate between credible and non-credible seals (Torelli et al., 2020; Santos & Silva, 2021).

Transparency—including detailed disclosure of supply chains, environmental metrics, and third-party audits—signals brand confidence and reduces information asymmetry (Leonidou et al., 2020; Rahman & Nguyen-Viet, 2022). Brands that proactively share both successes and challenges are perceived as more trustworthy, even when their environmental performance is imperfect (Chen & Chang, 2020; Javed et al., 2021).

From a strategic perspective, Villaronte and Yuesti (2025) emphasized that global marketing success requires cultural intelligence and authentic adaptation. In green marketing, this translates to ensuring that sustainability claims are consistent across all markets, as inconsistencies amplify skepticism. Similarly, Osano et al. (2026) highlighted that policy interventions and institutional credibility are essential for building trust—a principle equally applicable to corporate environmental governance.

3. RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

This study employed a qualitative research design grounded in secondary data analysis to examine how greenwashing impacts brand loyalty within global consumer markets. The qualitative approach was appropriate for exploring the nuanced, context-driven relationship between deceptive environmental claims, consumer psychology, and behavioral outcomes.

Data Sources

Multiple secondary sources were analyzed to ensure depth and triangulation, including: Peer-reviewed journal articles from Scopus, Web of Science, and Google Scholar (2020–2026) focusing on greenwashing, brand loyalty, consumer skepticism, sustainability marketing, and corporate social responsibility; Industry reports from organizations such as TerraChoice, the European Commission, the Federal Trade Commission, and global sustainability consultancies; Case studies of greenwashing controversies involving major global brands (e.g., Volkswagen, H&M, Shell, Nestlé) and their impact on consumer loyalty; Market research reports on consumer attitudes toward green claims, skepticism trends, and loyalty behaviors across North America, Europe, and Asia-Pacific markets.

Analytical Method

The data were analyzed using thematic analysis, a method suitable for identifying, analyzing, and interpreting patterns or themes across qualitative data (Braun & Clarke, 2021). The analysis focused on recurring themes related to: Forms and drivers of greenwashing; Consumer responses to perceived deception; Mediating mechanisms (skepticism, trust, perceived betrayal); Moderating factors (authenticity, certifications, transparency); Cultural variations in greenwashing effects; Strategies for rebuilding loyalty after greenwashing exposure

Coding was both inductive and deductive, allowing themes to emerge from the data while remaining anchored in the conceptual framework of signaling, attribution, and social identity theories.

Theoretical Framework

This study is guided by three complementary frameworks: Signaling Theory, which explains how brands use environmental claims as signals of unobservable qualities and how false signals damage credibility (Connelly et al., 2020). Attribution Theory, which illuminates how consumers infer motives behind green claims and how opportunistic attributions intensify skepticism (Nyilasy et al., 2020). Commitment-Trust Theory, which provides insight into how trust erosion leads to relationship dissolution and diminished loyalty (Morgan & Hunt, 2020).

These frameworks enable a comprehensive understanding of how greenwashing triggers psychological mechanisms that ultimately undermine brand loyalty.

4. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Greenwashing Directly Erodes Brand Loyalty

The analysis consistently demonstrates a strong negative relationship between perceived greenwashing and brand loyalty. Across multiple studies, consumers who perceive a brand as engaging in greenwashing report significantly lower repurchase intentions, reduced positive word-of-mouth, and increased switching behaviors (Zhang et al., 2022; Goh & Balaji, 2020; Kumar & Kaur, 2021). This effect persists even when consumers previously held favorable attitudes toward the brand, indicating that greenwashing acts as a "betrayal" that fundamentally alters the relationship (Torelli et al., 2020; Rahman & Nguyen-Viet, 2022).

"Greenwashing doesn't just disappoint consumers—it betrays them. The emotional response is akin to discovering a trusted friend has been lying." (Chen & Chang, 2020, p. 45)

Quantitative meta-analyses confirm that the greenwashing-loyalty relationship has a medium-to-large effect size, with brand trust explaining substantial variance in this relationship (Leonidou et al., 2020; Santos & Silva, 2021). Notably, the negative impact of greenwashing is stronger for attitudinal loyalty (emotional attachment) than for behavioral loyalty (habitual repurchase), suggesting that once emotional bonds are

broken, consumers actively seek alternatives rather than continuing out of inertia (Javed et al., 2021; Ahmad & Zhang, 2020).

Consumer Skepticism and Brand Trust as Key Mediators

The relationship between greenwashing and loyalty is not direct but mediated through psychological mechanisms. Perceived greenwashing increases consumer skepticism, which in turn reduces brand trust, ultimately diminishing loyalty (de Freitas Netto et al., 2020; Nyilasy et al., 2020). This mediation chain has been validated across multiple cultural contexts, including North America, Europe, and Asia (Ulusoy, 2021; Goswami & Sarma, 2021).

Skepticism operates as both a cognitive and affective response. Cognitively, consumers become more analytical and critical of brand communications, scrutinizing claims for evidence and consistency (Mohr et al., 2020; Raza et al., 2020). Affectively, skepticism is accompanied by feelings of suspicion, cynicism, and emotional distancing (Nguyen et al., 2020; Torelli et al., 2020). Together, these responses undermine the emotional bonds that characterize strong brand loyalty.

Brand trust, particularly integrity-based trust, emerges as the most critical mediator. When consumers perceive that a brand has deliberately misled them about environmental practices, integrity trust collapses (Morgan & Hunt, 2020). Unlike competence failures (e.g., a product malfunction), integrity failures are perceived as character flaws, making recovery exceptionally difficult (Connelly et al., 2020; Javed et al., 2021).

Cultural Variations Moderate Greenwashing Effects

The impact of greenwashing on loyalty varies across cultural contexts. In collectivist societies (e.g., China, India, Philippines), greenwashing not only damages individual loyalty but also triggers community-based negative word-of-mouth, as consumers warn family and social networks (Zhang et al., 2022; Ulusoy, 2021). In these contexts, brand betrayal is perceived as a collective harm, amplifying reputational damage (Goswami & Sarma, 2021; Rahman & Nguyen-Viet, 2022).

In individualistic societies (e.g., United States, Western Europe), consumers respond more individualistically, switching to alternative brands that better align with personal environmental values (Ahmad & Zhang, 2020; Leonidou et al., 2020). However, digital platforms have enabled cross-cultural spillover effects, where greenwashing exposure in one market rapidly damages brand perceptions globally (Santos & Silva, 2021; Chen & Chang, 2020).

Villaronte and Yuesti (2025) emphasized that cultural intelligence in global marketing requires understanding these contextual variations. A greenwashing scandal in one region may not remain contained, as social media and global news dissemination accelerate cross-cultural awareness. Brands operating across multiple markets must therefore ensure consistency in environmental claims and practices to avoid damaging loyalty in all markets.

Authenticity, Certifications, and Transparency as Buffers

Despite the damaging effects of greenwashing, several factors moderate the relationship. Brand authenticity—the perception that environmental commitments reflect genuine organizational values—significantly reduces the negative impact of isolated green marketing missteps (Raza et al., 2020; Goh & Balaji, 2020). Authentic brands that acknowledge limitations and demonstrate continuous improvement are often forgiven by consumers, whereas inauthentic brands face immediate and severe punishment (Nyilasy et al., 2020; Kumar & Kaur, 2021).

Third-party certifications serve as credibility signals that reduce consumer skepticism (de Freitas Netto et al., 2020). However, not all certifications are equally effective. Well-established, rigorous certifications (e.g., B Corp, Fair Trade, Energy Star) significantly enhance trust, while weak or self-created seals may backfire, increasing skepticism (Torelli et al., 2020; Zhang et al., 2022). Consumers are becoming increasingly sophisticated in distinguishing credible certifications from "greenwashing badges" (Santos & Silva, 2021; Mohr et al., 2020).

Transparency—proactive disclosure of both environmental achievements and shortcomings—emerges as a powerful trust-building strategy (Leonidou et al., 2020; Rahman & Nguyen-Viet, 2022). Brands that publish detailed sustainability reports, disclose supply chain practices, and invite third-party audits signal confidence in their operations and respect for consumer intelligence (Chen & Chang, 2020; Javed et al., 2021).

Drawing from donor relations literature, Villaronte and Guevarra (2025) demonstrated that transparent communication of resource utilization and impact outcomes significantly enhances stakeholder trust and long-term commitment. Similarly, Osano et al. (2026) highlighted that institutional credibility, built through consistent and verifiable practices, is essential for maintaining stakeholder loyalty. These principles translate directly to brand-consumer relationships in green marketing contexts.

Digital Amplification and Reputational Spillovers

The digital age has fundamentally altered the greenwashing-loyalty dynamic. Social media platforms enable rapid exposure of corporate hypocrisy, with viral campaigns and hashtags (e.g., #GreenwashingExposed, #FakeGreen) amplifying reputational damage (Goh & Balaji, 2020; Nguyen et al., 2020). Consumer-generated content, including investigative videos, side-by-side comparisons, and personal testimonials, often carries more credibility than corporate communications (Ulusoy, 2021; Goswami & Sarma, 2021).

The speed of digital information dissemination means that greenwashing has immediate and far-reaching consequences. A single exposé can trigger cascading negative word-of-mouth, media coverage, and regulatory scrutiny within hours (Zhang et al., 2022; Torelli et al., 2020). Once negative sentiment reaches critical mass, recovery becomes extraordinarily difficult, as search engine results and social media archives perpetuate the scandal indefinitely (Kumar & Kaur, 2021; Rahman & Nguyen-Viet, 2022).

Villaronte (2026) emphasized that in the age of internationalized marketing, stakeholder perceptions are shaped by digital narratives that transcend traditional geographic boundaries. Educational institutions, like commercial brands, must ensure that their communications align with demonstrable practices to avoid skepticism and disengagement. This principle is equally applicable to corporate green marketing, where digital authenticity is paramount.

Recovery Strategies and Rebuilding Loyalty

For brands that have engaged in greenwashing, recovery is possible but challenging. Effective recovery strategies include: immediate cessation of deceptive claims, public acknowledgment of shortcomings, third-party audits of environmental practices, implementation of verifiable improvements, and transparent reporting of progress (Chen & Chang, 2020; Leonidou et al., 2020). However, recovery requires sustained effort over extended periods, as trust rebuilds slowly (Morgan & Hunt, 2020; Javed et al., 2021).

Importantly, recovery is more successful when brands engage in "overcompensation"—exceeding minimum standards to demonstrate genuine commitment (Santos & Silva, 2021; Ahmad & Zhang, 2020). Brands that

merely return to baseline practices are rarely forgiven, as consumers perceive insufficient change (Nyilasy et al., 2020; Goh & Balaji, 2020). In contrast, brands that become industry leaders in sustainability can transform greenwashing scandals into turnaround narratives (Raza et al., 2020; Ulusoy, 2021).

Villaronte and Yuesti (2025) noted that strategic implementation of global marketing requires adaptive learning from failures. Brands that transparently acknowledge past greenwashing and demonstrate structural changes to prevent recurrence can, over time, rebuild consumer trust. However, this process requires cultural intelligence, patience, and genuine organizational transformation rather than superficial public relations efforts.

5. CONCLUSION

In an era of heightened environmental consciousness and consumer skepticism, greenwashing has emerged as a significant threat to brand loyalty. This research demonstrates that perceived greenwashing directly and indirectly undermines loyalty through the mediating mechanisms of consumer skepticism and brand trust, particularly integrity-based trust. The negative effects are amplified in digital environments, where information spreads rapidly and reputational damage becomes persistent.

The findings indicate that authenticity, third-party certifications, and transparency serve as critical buffers against greenwashing effects. Brands that demonstrate genuine environmental commitment, seek credible external validation, and communicate transparently with consumers are better positioned to maintain loyalty even when isolated mistakes occur. Conversely, brands that engage in systematic deception face severe and lasting consequences, including consumer boycotts, negative word-of-mouth, and regulatory sanctions.

Cultural variations moderate the greenwashing-loyalty relationship, with collectivist societies experiencing amplified reputational damage due to community-based information sharing. Global brands must therefore ensure consistency in environmental claims and practices across all markets to avoid cross-cultural spillover effects. Digital platforms have erased geographic boundaries, making localized greenwashing a global liability.

For brands that have engaged in greenwashing, recovery is possible but requires genuine organizational transformation, public accountability, third-party verification, and sustained transparent communication. Superficial apologies or token improvements are insufficient to restore trust. Ultimately, the most effective strategy is prevention: aligning marketing communications with demonstrable environmental practices from the outset.

Recommendations

Adopt Authentic Sustainability Practices Before Communicating Them. Brands should ensure that environmental claims reflect genuine organizational capabilities and commitments, avoiding the temptation to exaggerate or misrepresent for competitive advantage.

Seek Credible Third-Party Certifications. Independent verification through recognized certification bodies (e.g., B Corp, Fair Trade, LEED) reduces consumer skepticism and provides external validation of environmental claims.

Implement Transparent Communication Strategies. Brands should proactively disclose environmental metrics, supply chain practices, and both successes and challenges, inviting consumer scrutiny and demonstrating confidence in their operations.

Develop Culturally Intelligent Green Marketing Approaches. Global brands must adapt their environmental messaging to diverse cultural contexts while maintaining consistent underlying practices, recognizing that greenwashing exposure in one market rapidly damages global reputation.

Establish Rapid Response Mechanisms for Greenwashing Allegations. When concerns arise, brands should respond immediately with transparency, third-party investigations, and concrete corrective actions rather than defensiveness or denial.

Invest in Digital Reputation Monitoring. Given the speed of social media amplification, brands must continuously monitor consumer sentiment and respond proactively to misinformation while addressing legitimate concerns.

By aligning environmental communications with genuine practices, embracing transparency, and responding authentically to consumer concerns, brands can navigate the skeptical landscape of modern green marketing. In an age where consumers increasingly vote with their wallets for environmental responsibility, authenticity is not merely an ethical choice but a strategic imperative for sustained brand loyalty.

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