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Greenwashing and Sustainable Consumption in India: A Socio-legal Study of Consumer Perception, Behaviour, and the Legal Enforcement Gap

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Article	Abstract
Keywords: Consumer protection laws; Development Goals (SDGs); Greenwashing; Sustainable Consumption. Article History Received: Mar 14, 2026; Reviewed: Jul 2, 2026; Accepted: Jul 22, 2026; Published: Jul 31, 2026. DOI: 10.28946/slrev.v10i2.5872	Sustainable marketing has reshaped recent consumption behaviours. As global awareness of green living grows, businesses are gradually promoting the "green badge" to coincide with consumer values and the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). This eco trend has given rise to greenwashing, an unfair trade practice that deceives consumers about a product or service's environmental benefits, undermining consumer loyalty and decision-making. The present study empirically investigates the rising consumer awareness and the limited enforcement capacity, compounded by procedural complexities, that undermine consumer participation. A mixed-methods approach has been used to analyse descriptive statistics, cross-tabulations, and qualitative responses by theme to understand consumer awareness, purchasing behaviour, experiences of greenwashing, and enforcement of legal rights. In the present study, researchers have focused on and elaborated on two factors -age-group and Income-group of the consumer to understand the gap between awareness and enforcement of legal rights. The results show that a majority of respondents (87%) are aware of the concepts of green consumption and greenwashing, but this awareness does not translate into legal action against greenwashing. The study adds to the existing literature on consumer behaviour by empirically demonstrating the awareness-action paradox in the context of sustainability and the key role of regulatory and procedural barriers in mediating consumer behaviour in the marketplace.

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INTRODUCTION

In an era characterised by heightened awareness of climate issues and a rapid shift towards sustainability, there is growing consumer demand for eco-friendly products and services. The growing concerns about environmental degradation and human health have led some consumers to change their behaviour, resulting in a preference for sustainable products and indicating their

intention to support environmental restoration.¹ The studies have shown that consumers are more likely to demand green products² and are willing to pay more for the green products.³ The escalating challenges of climate change and environmental degradation continued to pressure businesses to reassess their practices and respond proactively. The shift towards green consumption continues to pressure companies to manufacture durable, non-toxic, and environmentally friendly products made from recycled materials or with minimal packaging.⁴ Therefore, the companies responded by adopting purported sustainable business practices, leading to a significant rise in products marketed (advertised) as environmentally friendly, organic, energy-efficient, sustainable, or carbon-neutral.⁵ As a result, many enterprises have transitioned from conventional marketing approaches to green marketing, presenting themselves as ardent advocates and torchbearers of environmental stewardship and sustainability rather than comprehensive strategic transformation.⁶ This includes product redesign, adjustments in production processes, innovations in packaging, and the use of eco-labels to promote environmentally friendly products.⁷ On the other hand, some companies resort to tactical greening, which involves limited modifications with minimal cross-functional coordination.⁸

Tactical greening often serves to mislead consumers about a firm's environmental practices or the ecological benefits of its products and services through various communication strategies. Such practices are commonly referred to as greenwashing⁹, in which consumers are intentionally misinformed, deceived by false claims, or presented with selectively disclosed positive information about a company's environmental or social performance.¹⁰ This reliance on

¹ Jacquelyn A. Ottman, *The New Rules of Green Marketing: Strategies, Tools, and Inspiration for Sustainable Branding* (Sheffield: Greenleaf Publishing, 2011), p 27

² Cristina Casalegno, Elisa Candelo, and Gabriele Santoro, "Exploring the Antecedents of Green and Sustainable Purchase Behaviour: A Comparison among Different Generations," *Psychology & Marketing* 39, no. 5 (2022): 1007–1021, <https://doi.org/10.1002/mar.21637>

³ Francesco Testa, Gaia Pretner, Roberta Iovino, Guia Bianchi, Sara Tessitore, and Fabio Iraldo, "Drivers to Green Consumption: A Systematic Review," *Environment, Development and Sustainability* 23, no. 4 (2021): 4826–4880, <https://doi.org/10.1007/s10668-020-00844-5>

⁴ Dhanashree Jog and V. Pani, "A Review of Consumer Understanding of Green Marketing and Deceptive Green Marketing," in *Sustainable Development Seen Through the Lenses of Ethnoeconomics and the Circular Economy*, ed. Walter Leal Filho and Vesna Kuzmanović (Cham: Springer, 2024), https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-031-72676-7_11

⁵ Iñaki Heras-Saizarbitoria, Olivier Boiral, and Alberto Díaz de Junguitu, "Environmental Management Certification and Environmental Performance: Greening or Greenwashing?," *Business Strategy and the Environment* 29, no. 6 (2020): 2829–2841, <https://doi.org/10.1002/bse.2546>

⁶ Subhabrata Bobby Banerjee, Charles S. Gulas, and Easwar Iyer, "Shades of Green: A Multidimensional Analysis of Environmental Advertising," *Journal of Advertising* 24, no. 2 (1995): 24, <https://doi.org/10.1080/00913367.1995.10673473>

⁷ Teresa Laureti and Irene Benedetti, "Exploring Pro-Environmental Food Purchasing Behaviour: An Empirical Analysis of Italian Consumers," *Journal of Cleaner Production* 172 (2018): 3367–3378, <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jclepro.2017.11.086>

⁸ Menon, A., & Menon, A. (1997). Enviropreneurial marketing strategy: The emergence of corporate environmentalism as market strategy. *Journal of Marketing*, 61(1), 51–67.

⁹ Frank Bowen, *After Greenwashing: Symbolic Corporate Environmentalism and Society* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2014), p. 78.

¹⁰ Angelika Kantor, "Greenwashing: Consumer Trust and Deceptive Corporate Practices," in *Trust, Media and the Economy*, ed. R. Hammer (Abingdon: Routledge, 2025).

marketing messages leaves consumers vulnerable to misleading claims.¹¹ The studies have shown that green scepticism negatively affects purchase intentions towards sustainable products.¹² Information Asymmetry Theory explains why greenwashing persists: companies usually know more than consumers about product composition and environmental impact, making consumers dependent on labels and advertising claims that are difficult for the consumer to verify.¹³ Nonetheless, it seems that the use of these tactics is increasing over time, perhaps as a result of increased demand for environmentally friendly services and goods that must be offered (product-level greenwashing), but may benefit the companies in the short term, it can significantly harm both society and the environment.¹⁴ Recent studies emphasise that greenwashing not only fosters consumer confusion but also undermines trust in sustainable branding and supply chain accountability.¹⁵ This is also explained through Behavioural Theory, which accounts for the heuristics and biases that lead consumers to rely on trust, habit, and convenience rather than independent verification.¹⁶ Hence, misleading green and false environmental claims impede the widespread acceptance of green products.¹⁷

Law Enforcement and Regulatory Deterrence Theory explains that the deterrent effect of law or regulatory measures depends not on their existence alone, but on whether they are backed by practical enforcement, monitoring and accessible grievance redressal, which shows the failure to protect consumers from greenwashing.¹⁸ As compared to developed countries, developing countries (like India) have a moderate understanding of greenwashing¹⁹ and less concern for the environment.

The present study investigates the relationship between consumer awareness of greenwashing and the exercise of legal rights in India, from the perspective of urban consumers in Delhi. While existing research on greenwashing in the Indian context has grown steadily, it remains predominantly descriptive, documenting regulatory fragmentation and enforcement gaps

¹¹ Wutthiya Aekthanate Srisathan and Phaninee Naruetharadhol, "Exploring Moral Hazard and Adverse Selection in the Context of Greenwashing and Organic Product Consumption," *Journal of Retailing and Consumer Services* 84 (2025): 104203, <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jretconser.2024.104203>

¹² Carla Rossi and Francesca Rivetti, "Young Consumers' Purchase Behaviour of Sustainably-Labelled Food Products: What Is the Role of Scepticism?," *Food Quality and Preference* 105 (2023): 104772, <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.foodqual.2022.104772>

¹³ Dejan Glavas, Gilles Grolleau, and Naoufel Mzoughi, "Greening the Greenwashers – How to Push Greenwashers Towards More Sustainable Trajectories," *Journal of Cleaner Production* 382 (2023): 135301, <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jclepro.2022.135301>

¹⁴ *Ibid.*

¹⁵ O. B. Wafa and O. Fatine, "Greenwashing or Genuine Commitment? Assessing the Role of Sustainable Branding in Supply Chain Accountability and Consumer Trust," in 2025 16th International Conference on Logistics and Supply Chain Management (LOGISTIQUA) (Casablanca, Morocco: IEEE, 2025), pp. 1–10, <https://doi.org/10.1109/LOGISTIQUA66323.2025.11122719>.

¹⁶ Kantor (2025) Note 10

¹⁷ Sofia Gomes, João M. Lopes, and Sónia Nogueira, "Willingness to Pay More for Green Products: A Critical Challenge for Gen Z," *Journal of Cleaner Production* 390 (2023): 136092, <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jclepro.2023.136092>

¹⁸ Sebastião Vieira de Freitas Netto, Marcos Felipe Falcão Sobral, Ana Regina Bezerra Ribeiro, and Gleibson Robert da Luz Soares, "Concepts and Forms of Greenwashing: A Systematic Review," *Environmental Sciences Europe* 32, no. 1 (2020): 19, <https://doi.org/10.1186/s12302-020-0300-3>

¹⁹ Deepti Jog and Divya Singhal, "Greenwashing Understanding Among Indian Consumers and Its Impact on Their Green Consumption," *Global Business Review* 25, no. 2 (2024): 491–511, <https://doi.org/10.1177/0972150920962933>

without empirically testing how consumer awareness of green products and greenwashing translates into the enforcement of regulatory measures. This gap is particularly evident given the recent notification of the CCPA greenwashing guidelines, whose relationship to actual consumer redressal behaviour has yet to be tested empirically. Additionally, most existing studies on greenwashing dealt with consumer awareness, socio-economic status and legal enforcement as separate subjects of inquiry, rarely tested together. To address this gap, the present study integrates consumer perceptions of greenwashing with an examination of how awareness, socio-economic status, and perceived enforcement capacity jointly shape whether consumers act on their knowledge. This may hold the key to assessing whether socio-legal strategy would result in compliance by business entities and active participation by consumers.

Greenwashing in Indian Context and the Research Gap

Empirical research in the Indian context remains extremely rare, despite growing consumer awareness of environmental issues. In addition to being misleading advertising, Awasthi and Singh (2025)²⁰ claim that greenwashing in India is a systemic governance problem exacerbated by a lack of enforcement of consumer rules. In a similar vein, (Dash et al., 2025)²¹ demonstrate how different legal frameworks, such as those governing taxation, intellectual property rights, and ESG compliance, create gaps that enable companies to make fraudulent green claims without accountability. Awasthi and Dash have identified governance and statutory gaps, but do not survey consumers directly. According to Binnuri and R. M. (2024), despite consumers' growing inclination toward sustainable consumption, many remain unaware of their legal rights and complaint procedures, leaving them vulnerable to dishonest business practices.²² But the research does not measure the correlation between awareness and action. Jog and Singhal (2020) explored greenwashing practices within the personal care industry. They found that Indian consumers have a moderate understanding of greenwashing, which influences their green purchasing behaviour, and that higher-income consumers demonstrate greater environmental consciousness in their buying behaviour. There is a critical need for consumer awareness in India, given the lack of stringent regulatory frameworks to address greenwashing.²³ This study leaves an empirical gap at the intersection of consumer awareness, perceived enforcement capacity, and actual legal action, which it addresses using primary survey data from Delhi. It should also be noted that much of the literature relied upon above is drawn from studies in marketing, sustainability, and consumer behaviour. In addition, the Indian legal framework, including consumer protection law, environmental law, and regulatory governance, has been referred to and relied upon. This study tests whether awareness of greenwashing translates into the exercise of legal rights.

²⁰ Vedika Awasthi and Atharava Singh, *Green Lies, Legal Ties: Greenwashing the New Corporate Camouflage* (SSRN, 14 July, 2025), <https://doi.org/10.2139/ssrn.5359851>

²¹ Ashutosh Dash and Himanshu Sekhar Rout, "Unpacking the ESG–Financial Performance Nexus: The Moderating Effect of Volatility on Indian Companies," *Business and Society Review* 130, no. 4 (2025): 444–464, <https://doi.org/10.1111/basr.70020>

²² Anuradha Binnuri and Rajanikanth M., "Consumerism, Sustainable Consumption, and Consumer Citizenship in the Indian Context," *Cogent Business & Management* 11, no. 1 (2024): 2428777, <https://doi.org/10.1080/23311975.2024.2428777>

²³ Deepti Jog and Divya Singhal, "Greenwashing Understanding Among Indian Consumers and Its Impact on Their Green Consumption," *Global Business Review* 25, no. 2 (2024): 491–511, <https://doi.org/10.1177/0972150920962933>

This study focuses on the discrepancy between Indian consumers' perceptions of environmental claims and the implementation of their rights. This study presents the following hypotheses to experimentally assess the relationships among consumer knowledge, perceptions of green claims, and the exercise of legal rights in India. There are three hypotheses regarding this research. Hypothesis 1(H1): High awareness of green consumption and greenwashing among consumer is not associated with regular purchase of green products or initiation of formal legal action against misleading claims; Hypothesis 2 (H2): Higher household income increases both engagement with green products and exposure to misleading environmental claims, whereas lower income limits market access; and Hypothesis 3 (H3): Consumers with greater awareness of legal rights and grievance redressal mechanisms are more likely to consider formal action against misleading green claims.

RESEARCH METHODS

The research design employed a mixed-methods approach to understand how consumers observe greenwashing and whether information about particular products affects consumers' decisions to enforce their rights under consumer law in India. Quantitative data were collected through structured survey questions to evaluate consumer awareness, purchasing behaviour regarding misleading environmental claims, and knowledge of legal remedies. Qualitative data were collected through open-ended questions on attitudes, challenges in seeking redress, and expectations regarding proposed regulatory reforms. Respondents were sampled using purposive sampling, including only those who had purchased green products or been exposed to environmental marketing claims.

Data Collection

Data were collected from around 125 consumers in Delhi (India), one of the metro cities of India known for its diversity across various socio-economic characteristics and levels of environmental marketing practices by domestic and multinational brands. Data on respondents' age (≥ 18 years), income, education, and gender were also collected. As this research is exploratory and socio-legal in nature, statistical generalisation by sampling cannot be achieved; however, because it was important for participants to have some relevant experience working with the themes of this study, a purposive sample was deemed appropriate.

A structured questionnaire was employed to gather data, consisting of (1) demographics, (2) awareness of green consumption and purchasing behaviour, (3) experience with deceptive environmental claims and methods used to verify such claims, as well as responses to greenwashing and; (4) open-ended questions inquiring about experiences on misleading claims, barriers for legal remedies experienced by the participants and regulatory reforms suggested.

The dataset was cleaned, coded and anonymised for the purposes of analysis. Quantitative data were explored using descriptive statistics, such as frequencies, percentages, and cross-tabulations, to investigate consumer awareness of greenwashing and behavioural tendencies to purchase products subject to greenwashing, as well as individuals' experiences with it and their knowledge of legal remedies across demographic groups. Qualitative responses were evaluated with thematic analysis, along with manual coding to identify common themes of consumer scepticism, unwillingness to act through the courts, procedural barriers, and expectations of increased regulatory oversight.

The study has certain limitations also. A formal pilot test of the questionnaire was not conducted, nor were reliability measures such as Cronbach's alpha assessed. Also, purposive sampling and the use of self-report as a data collection method limit the generalising of the findings to objectively validated greenwashing cases. However, the mixed-methods approach does provide observational data on socio-legal issues surrounding responses to greenwashing in India.

ANALYSIS AND DISCUSSIONS

This part presents empirical results and discusses demographic factors that affect green consumption practices and respondents' views on greenwashing in Delhi, India. These findings are divided into two major parts: Age-Based Analysis and Income-Based Analysis.

Age-Based Analysis: Awareness-Green Behaviour Gap

The sample has been chosen from a wide cross-section of people residing in Delhi. There is an almost equal gender distribution in the sample, with 51.2% males and 48.8% females among the respondents, thus ensuring that the results of this analysis are not biased towards either gender. (Table 1).

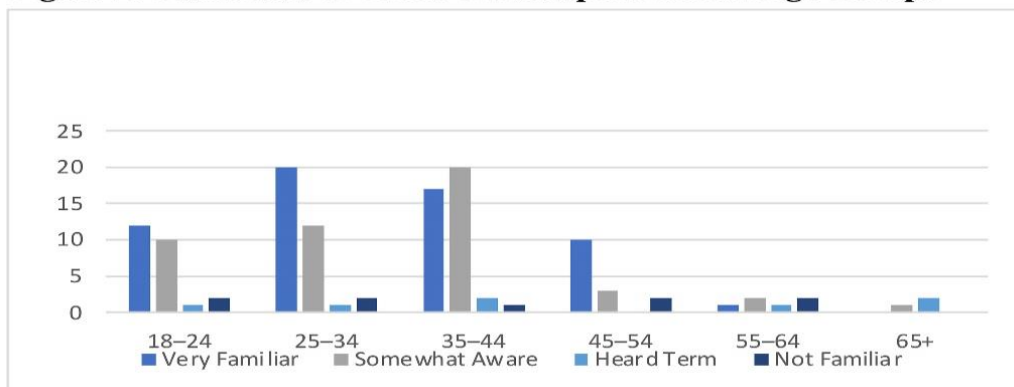
Table 1: Demographic Profile of Respondents

Age Group	Counts	% of Total	Cumulative %
18-24	24	19.2%	19.2%
25-34	34	27.2%	46.4%
35-44	42	33.6%	80.0%
45-54	16	12.8%	92.8%
55-64	4	3.2%	96.0%
65+	5	4.0%	100.0%

Source: Authors' Survey data (2025)

Research shows that 87% of respondents have some level of awareness of green consumption. Of these, 48% were very familiar with the concept, while 39% had partial awareness. Only 7% of respondents said they did not know the concept, whereas 6% said they knew the term but not its significance (Figure 2).

Figure 2: Awareness of Green Consumption across Age Groups



Source: Authors' survey data (2025).

Respondents aged 25-44 are most aware of the idea, but purchases of such products are still occasional rather than regular. Whereas purchases by the 18-24 age group were even less common, despite being eco-friendly. (Figures 3 & 4)

Figure 3: Frequency of Green Product Purchases

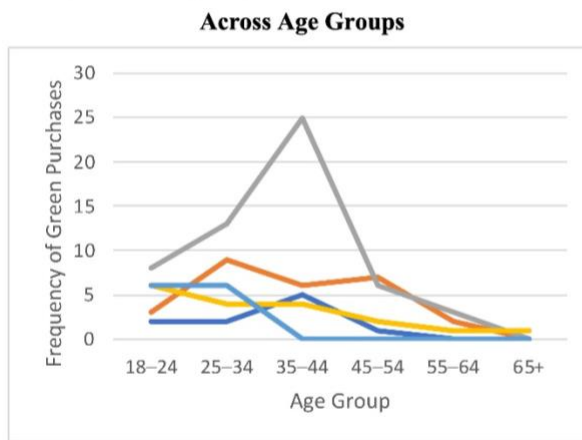
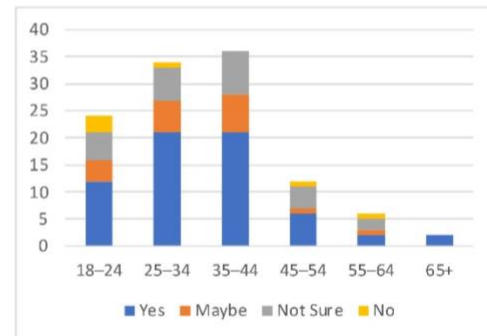


Figure 4: Age vs Purchase Behaviour / Greenwashing



Source: Authors' survey data (2025)

Analysis of the collected data reveals that although the respondents have some knowledge about green consumption, there is still room for improvement in the clarity of that knowledge, hence supporting Hypothesis 1. Age can be considered a fairly critical factor in awareness, purchasing behaviour, and susceptibility to greenwashing. The younger group, aged 18-24 years, had a comparatively high level of awareness, as many described themselves as very aware of green consumption or simply aware of it. High awareness is attributable to their education and use of digital media.²⁴ However, awareness does not always translate into purchasing behaviour, as the majority of respondents in this age bracket purchased products only occasionally or rarely.²⁵ This could be due to a lack of clarity about sustainability concepts, such as recycling, carbon footprints, and emissions reduction, among other factors.

It was found that the 25–34 age bracket was the most aware and active age group, with strong awareness of green products, high purchase frequency, and greater engagement with environmental advertisements and certifications. The 35–44 age group was evenly balanced, with a majority of respondents being either occasional or frequent buyers. The above-mentioned results indicate that there is a practical balance between awareness and purchases of green products across these age groups, driven more by health and quality concerns than by environmental consciousness. This trend aligns with earlier studies.²⁶

²⁴ M. Haider, R. Shannon, and G. P. Moschis. (2022). "Sustainable Consumption Research and the Role of Marketing: A Review of the Literature (1976–2021)." *Sustainability*, 14(7): 3999. <https://doi.org/10.3390/su14073999>

²⁵ Geertje Schuitema and Judith I. M. de Groot, "Green Consumerism: The Influence of Product Attributes and Values on Purchasing Intentions," *Journal of Consumer Behaviour* 14, no. 1 (2015): 57–69, <https://doi.org/10.1002/cb.1501>

²⁶ See Elina Ghazali, Pei Ching Soon, Dilip S. Mutum, and Bang Nguyen, "Health and Cosmetics: Investigating Consumers' Values for Buying Organic Personal Care Products," *Journal of Retailing and Consumer Services* 39 (2017): 154–163, <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jretconser.2017.08.002>; see also Jia Li, Hong He, Hong Liu, and Chenting Su, "Consumer Responses to Corporate Environmental Actions in China: An Environmental Legitimacy Perspective," *Journal of Business Ethics* 143, no. 3 (2017): 589–602.

Experiences of greenwashing closely followed this generational pattern. Respondents in the 25–34 and 35–44 age categories show the highest engagement with green products, leading to the highest exposure to greenwashing. At the same time, older adults report comparatively lower levels of greenwashing experience, attributable principally to minimal engagement with green products and uncertainty in verifying their authenticity (Table 5). This suggests that exposure to greenwashing correlates with fluctuations in consumers' purchasing behaviour.

Table 5: Experience of participants with the Misleading Environmental Claims

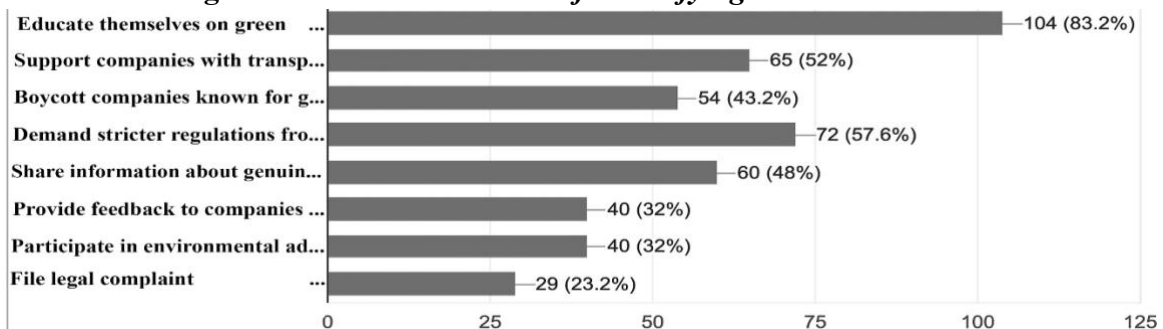
Experience of Participants with Misleading Advertisements	Counts	% of Total	Cumulative %
Maybe	23	18.50%	18.50%
No	11	8.90%	27.40%
Not Sure	26	21.00%	48.40%
Yes	64	51.60%	100.00%

Source: Authors' survey data (2025)

Although the prevalence of greenwashing made people more inclined to investigate and scrutinise what companies marketed, it also revealed their susceptibility to misleading campaigns. Younger participants (18-24 years old) admitted either having fallen victim to greenwashing schemes or being unsure whether this had happened, due to difficulties with discerning credible certifications from vague eco-labels. On the other hand, the majority of those aged 45 and older experienced greenwashing less frequently, not because of firmer belief in the company's statements, but because of lower interest in green products. Older participants exhibited lower levels of awareness, higher scepticism toward environmental marketing and higher trust in existing brands, which made them more practical in their consumption decisions. Thus, the connection between greenwashing and changes in consumer behaviour can be established.

The above findings reveal that greenwashing is not only an academic concept but a common reality that affects many consumers. The prevalence of "unsure/maybe" responses indicates how difficult it is for consumers to independently verify whether claims made by products are genuine, as those claims are usually general and unsubstantiated. In sum, more than half of the participants reported being duped at least once, indicating that greenwashing is a common marketing practice. Nevertheless, despite the high rate of greenwashing, most consumers did not report the case to receive formal compensation. On the contrary, consumers' main response to misleading information has been informal actions such as switching brands, refusing to purchase, or ignoring the situation altogether (see Figure 6 below).

Figure 6: Consumer Methods for Verifying Environmental Claims



Source: Author's survey data (2025)

This underscores the problem of information asymmetry – where corporations have the resources and ability to create and disseminate environmental claims, whereas consumers lack standard means to verify them. Besides generating trust issues between consumers and brands, the asymmetry also leads to greenwashing, since false claims are never challenged. In the absence of proper verification procedures and opportunities for consumer action, corporations have no responsibility or accountability, allowing misleading green messaging to go unnoticed.

Previous research shows that consumers often come across sustainability claims related to partial or surface-level changes, which include changes in packaging, some materials used or a particular production stage and which are then advertised as "green," "organic", or "sustainable."²⁷ This practice is neither truthful nor sufficient, as it does not consider the entire product life cycle, from raw material acquisition through use to end-of-life disposal. It is also clear that greenwashing undermines the effectiveness of CSR and ESG efforts as responsible management tools.

The respondents noted that there was a problem in recognising genuine sustainability initiatives and misleading environmental statements, causing confusion, detachment, and, in some cases, even abandoning environmentally friendly purchasing. The results are aligned with previous findings on the negative effects of greenwashing on brand credibility, brand loyalty, and the consumer's intention to buy environmentally friendly products²⁸. Once trust is undermined, CSR and ESG reports lose their normative and informative power, meaning they cease to function as behaviour modifiers.²⁹

Income-Based Analysis: Economic Determinants of Green Consumption

Considering the gender distribution, the sample contains 51.2% male and 48.8% female subjects. With regard to salary level, respondents include those with annual salaries below INR 3,00,000 (17.1%) and those with annual salaries of INR 6,00,001-10,00,000 (21.1%) (Table 7).

²⁷ Rui Guo, Wei Zhang, Ting Wang, Chao-Bin Li, and Lina Tao, "Timely or Considered? Brand Trust Repair Strategies and Mechanisms After Greenwashing in China—From a Legitimacy Perspective," *Industrial Marketing Management* 72 (2018): 127–137, <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.indmarman.2018.04.001>. The critics noted that most of the other ingredients remained unchanged, suggesting a superficial green shift rather than substantive environmental progress. Similarly, H&M has been criticised for its pledge to use 100% recyclable or sustainable materials by 2030. While the fast-fashion giant promotes this goal, critics argue that the sheer volume of production, combined with the complexity of its supply chain, undermines its sustainability message. Many consumers and stakeholders have expressed scepticism over whether the company's green branding aligns with its actual environmental impact

²⁸ See Esperanza Delgado Martínez, Melchor Cardona, María Fernanda Plazas Ramírez, and Valentina Baracaldo Quiceno, "Genuine Sustainability vs. Greenwashing: Consumer Responses to Environmental Practices and Biodegradable Material in Colombian Service Firms," *Cleaner Environmental Systems* 19 (2025): 100375, <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.cesys.2025.100375>; See also Linda Daou, Elie Sayegh, Elie Atallah, Nadine Jabbour Al Maalouf, and Nadine Sarkis, "Greenwashing as a Barrier to Sustainable Marketing: Expectation Disconfirmation, Confusion, and Brand–Consumer Relationships," *Sustainability* 17, no. 22 (2025): 9979, <https://doi.org/10.3390/su17229979>

²⁹ See Thomas P. Lyon and A. W. Montgomery, "The Means and End of Greenwash," *Organization & Environment* 28, no. 2 (2015): 223–249, <https://doi.org/10.1177/1086026615575332>; Michael A. Delmas and Vanessa Cuerel Burbano, "The Drivers of Greenwashing," *California Management Review* 54, no. 1 (2011): 64–87, <https://doi.org/10.1525/cmr.2011.54.1.64>; Abdul Hassan et al., "Greenwashing in ESG: Identifying and Addressing False Claims of Sustainability," *Journal of Business and Sustainability Management* 6, no. 1 (2024): pp. xx–xx; Companies Act, 2013 (India), § 135 and Schedule VII; see also Elina Ghazali, Pei Ching Soon, Dilip S. Mutum, and Bang Nguyen, "Health and Cosmetics: Investigating Consumers' Values for Buying Green Personal Care Products," *Journal of Retailing and Consumer Services* 39 (2017): 154–163, <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jretconser.2017.08.002>

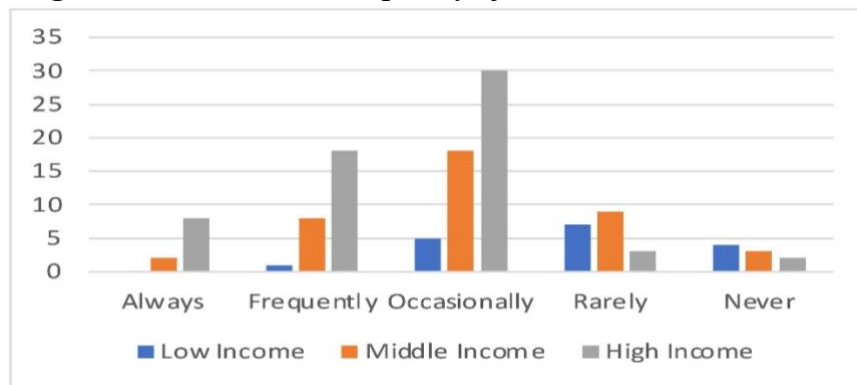
Table 7: Distribution of Respondents by Annual Household Income

Income	Counts	% of Total	Cumulative %
INR 10,00,001 - INR 20,00,000	22	17.9%	17.9%
INR 3,00,000 - INR 6,00,000	16	13.0%	30.9%
INR 6,00,001 - INR 10,00,000	26	21.1%	52.0%
Less than INR 3,00,000	21	17.1%	69.1%
More than INR 20,00,000	12	9.8%	78.9%
Prefer not to say	26	21.1%	100.0%

Source: Authors' Survey data (2025)

Respondents who were asked about their attitude towards purchasing green products were 72 people (58%), 35 people (28%) who were uncertain, and 18 people (14%) who denied this suggestion altogether (Figure 8).

Figure 8: Income-wise Frequency of Green Product Purchases



Source: Author's survey data (2025)

This indicates that a majority in the high-income group considered themselves extremely knowledgeable about eco-consumption, and also bought eco products often or sometimes. They also accounted for the highest percentage of consumers who felt they were victims of greenwashing, as expected, since they are the most active shoppers and therefore more susceptible to such tricks.

By contrast, respondents from lower-income groups showed lower familiarity with green products. Even when aware, their purchasing patterns were irregular, with most admitting to buying such products only rarely or not at all. Affordability appears to be the key limiting factor for these groups, as the price premium attached to eco-friendly products makes them less accessible.³⁰ Middle-income respondents formed a balanced segment, showing moderate awareness and purchasing behaviours that were occasional but more consistent than those in lower-income categories. Lower-income groups, on the other hand, remain less vulnerable, but largely due to economic exclusion from the green market, which raises important questions of equity in sustainable consumption³¹.

³⁰ Hong Wang, Bing Ma, Rui Bai, and Lei Zhang, "The Unexpected Effect of Frugality on Green Purchase Intention," *Journal of Retailing and Consumer Services* 59 (2021): 102385, <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jretconser.2020.102385>

³¹ João J. Ferreira, João M. Lopes, Sofia Gomes, et al., "Diverging or Converging to a Green World? Impact of Green Growth Measures on Countries' Economic Performance," *Environment, Development and Sustainability* (2023), <https://doi.org/10.1007/s10668-023-02991-x>

According to the study, individuals who earn more than ₹ 3 lakhs annually exhibit responsible consumption habits that support environmental preservation. However, when they discover that eco-friendly products are unaffordable, their concern for environmental preservation takes a back seat. Several factors, including quality, price, income, brand image, and education, influence consumers' willingness to purchase environmentally friendly products.

Legal Background Addressing Greenwashing in India

Until 2024, Indian law did not contain a provision that named or specifically defined greenwashing. Regulatory intervention proceeded instead through the general unfair trade practice and misleading advertisement provisions of consumer protection law, supplemented by the self-regulatory code of the Advertising Standards Council of India ("ASCI"). The Supreme Court in *Common Cause (A Regd. Society) v. Union of India*³² and Delhi High Court in *Dabur India Ltd. v. Advertising Standards Council of India*,³³ the court recognised ASCI's self-regulatory body as an effective first point of recourse for legal issues on misleading advertisements, sitting alongside other statutory frameworks (CCPA). This changed with the Central Consumer Protection Authority ("CCPA")'s notification of dedicated greenwashing guidelines in October 2024. Before the Greenwashing Rules 2024 were introduced, the Indian socio-legal system had several regulations that indirectly addressed greenwashing through corporate governance, financial regulation, advertising oversight, and consumer protection laws. These mechanisms can broadly be categorised into two regulatory approaches: (i) oversight of corporate conduct and disclosures, and (ii) protection of consumer rights against misleading claims. Under corporate governance regulation, Section 135 of the Companies Act, 2013 mandates eligible companies not only to allocate funds for Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR) activities but also to monitor, implement, and disclose such initiatives. Environmental sustainability programs form a crucial part of the CSR responsibilities. Environmental sustainability programs are often mentioned by corporations in annual reports, sustainability reports, and marketing materials to portray themselves as environmentally conscious organisations and to attract investment, regulators, and consumers. Although the above-mentioned actions can promote corporate responsibility, the lack of standardised program verification before 2024 could lead companies to select the most environmentally friendly programs while avoiding disclosure of other aspects of their environmental performance, resulting in greenwashing. Besides, financial market regulators have tried to increase transparency by adopting Environmental, Social, and Governance (ESG) reporting rules. Specifically, the Securities and Exchange Board of India (SEBI) established the Business Responsibility and Sustainability Reporting (BRSR) guidelines, which include information on the Environmental, Social, and Governance performance of listed companies. The main objective of these guidelines is to increase corporate transparency and help investors to make more informed decisions. In addition to SEBI's actions, the Reserve Bank of India (RBI) has managed greenwashing risks within the framework of green finance, specifically green deposits.

³² *Common Cause v. Union of India*, (2018) 5 SCC 1.

³³ *Dabur India Ltd. v. Advertising Standards Council of India*, 2023 SCC OnLine Del 64.

These measures aim to strengthen credibility and, therefore, consumer and investor confidence in environmentally labelled financial products by emphasising third-party verification, impact assessments, and assurance mechanisms. Yet these regulatory advancements have so far merely kept ESG disclosures largely self-reported, self-published, and unevenly verified (and sometimes not at all), allowing such disclosures to fall short of curtailing misleading environmental claims.³⁴ One of the key statutes that tackled misleading environmental claims in consumer protection is the Consumer Protection Act, 2019. The Act does not define greenwashing, yet it sets a strong foundation for legal claims against misrepresentation of "eco-friendly" practices as unfair trade practices. This gives the power under the Central Consumer Protection Authority (CCPA) to investigate such claims, impose a penalty and prohibit misleading advertisements

Pursuant to the CCPA Guidelines, 2024, along with the Consumer Protection Act, 2019, imprisonment for one year and penalties of up to ₹10 lakhs shall be imposed in case of any initial violation, while imprisonment for five years and penalties of up to ₹50 lakhs shall be imposed in case of any subsequent violation. This regulatory capacity has been significantly strengthened through the *Guidelines for Prevention and Regulation of Greenwashing or Misleading Environmental Claims, 2024*, issued under Section 18(2)(1) of the Act. These guidelines require that environmental claims be transparent, substantiated by credible certifications or scientific evidence, and easily accessible to consumers via QR codes, web links, or similar means. Consumers are thereby enabled to seek redress for false environmental claims, in addition to the existing remedies under the Act.

The observations made by the Supreme Court in the case of *Indian Medical Association v. Union of India*³⁵ Although misleading advertisements in the medical field are equally relevant to the environmental sphere, this is because the Supreme Court has recognised that misleading advertisements hamper consumers' informed decision-making, that such ads particularly harm vulnerable consumers, and that there is a need for stringent regulation of such advertisements.

In addition to statutory regulation, advertising oversight has been reinforced through self-regulatory mechanisms. The Advertising Standards Council of India (ASCI) issued the *Guidelines for Advertisements Making Environmental/Green Claims, 2024*, which emphasises accuracy, verifiability, and transparency in environmental advertising. In the matter of *Misleading Advertisement and Unfair Trade Practice by M/s Storia Foods and Beverages Pvt. Ltd.*, the CCPA ruled that the use of the phrase "100%" amounts to an absolute representation of fact that is supposed to be objectively verifiable. It was in the same case that the authority issued penalties and orders for the discontinuation of unsubstantiated "100%" claims.³⁶ Although ASCI operate as a self-regulatory body, it plays a crucial role in monitoring misleading advertisements. It may escalate non-compliance to statutory authorities such as the CCPA, thereby strengthening

³⁴ Mozaffar Khan, George Serafeim, and Aaron Yoon, "Corporate Sustainability: First Evidence on Materiality," *The Accounting Review* 91, no. 6 (2016): 1697–1724, <https://doi.org/10.2308/accr-51383>

³⁵ *Indian Medical Association & Anr. v. Union of India & Ors.*, W.P. (C) No. 645 of 2022, Supreme Court of India, Order dated 21 November 2023 (followed by orders dated 27 February 2024 and 10 April 2024).

³⁶ Central Consumer Protection Authority. (2026, 18 June). In the matter of: Misleading advertisement and unfair trade practice by M/s Storia Foods and Beverages Private Limited with respect to "100% Tender Coconut Water", associated health claims, and "100% Juice" claims on its Pomegranate, Mixed Fruit, Mango and Guava Chilli variants (Order dated 18 June 2026). Government of India. Central Consumer Protection Authority Orders

enforcement through regulatory convergence. India currently lacks a well-developed body of reported Supreme Court or High Court judgments explicitly addressing greenwashing as a distinct cause of action, but the 2024 Guidelines are, at the time of writing, largely untested before the higher judiciary

Several Indian companies have faced scrutiny for making misleading environmental claims in their advertising. In 2012, Godrej Industries claimed in a marketing campaign that its Good Knight Fast Card mosquito repellent was “100% natural” and “chemical-free”, however, the Advertising Standards Council of India (ASCI) found the claim to be false and misleading. Hindustan Unilever Limited (HUL) also came under scrutiny when it advertised its Surf Excel Easy Wash detergent as “100% natural” and “environment-friendly,” despite containing synthetic ingredients. In 2011, the Ministry of Environment and Forests filed a case against HUL for these false claims, and the Central Pollution Control Board imposed a fine of Rs.10 lakhs.³⁷

Similarly, Voltas Limited, a Tata Group company, launched a 2013 campaign describing its air conditioners as “eco-friendly” and having a “5-star energy rating,” although the products were later found to have a lower energy rating than claimed. As a result, it was fined Rs. 50,000 by the ASCI.³⁸

After the issuance of guidelines on greenwashing, ASCI had been vigilant in monitoring and regulating advertisement content. It imposed significant penalties on companies in India for misleading claims. For instance, Godrej Consumer Products Limited was fined Rs. 15 lakhs by the ASCI in 2015 for falsely claiming the product as “100% natural,” “biodegradable,” and “eco-friendly,” even though it contained synthetic ingredients.³⁹

In 2017, ASCI banned Bharat Petroleum’s advertisement claiming “Go Green with Speed for it reduces emissions” because the environmental assertions were not adequately substantiated.⁴⁰

Consumer Response to Greenwashing

Despite the growing prevalence of sustainability-oriented marketing, consumers in this Delhi-based sample rarely resort to formal legal remedies against companies that engage in greenwashing. Instead, they tend to adopt informal responses, such as switching brands, discontinuing purchases, leaving negative feedback on returned products, or simply disregarding the misleading claims altogether. Our data reveal that only 23.2% of consumers (See Table 6) want to pursue legal remedies against companies that engage in greenwashing. In contrast, others prefer informal actions such as switching brands, discontinuing purchases, leaving negative reviews, returning the product, or simply ignoring the issues. Our finding resonates with the conclusions of studies by Kishwar (2024) and Jog (2020), which found that low levels of environmental literacy and consumer rights awareness severely limit individuals' ability to recognise deceptive environmental claims or connect them to legal violations. It has also been

³⁷ Puneet Gupta and Nikhil Kalra, “Green to Greed: Unravelling Corporate Deception,” *Chartered Secretary* 54, no. 4 (April 2024): 122–127, https://www.icsi.edu/media/webmodules/CSJ/April_24/23.pdf

³⁸ Puneet, Note 39

³⁹ Puneet, Note 39

⁴⁰ Puneet, Note 39

observed that buyers (mainly above 45 years of age) of eco-friendly or organic products prefer trusted brands over regulatory verification, thereby reducing the initiation of complaints.

The absence of statutory clarity around environmental marketing claims deepens this problem⁴¹. India's consumer-protection framework lacks clear legal definitions for terms such as "eco-friendly" or "organic." This ambiguity allows businesses to self-declare products as "green," while consumers often assume such claims are government-regulated.⁴² As Kishwar (2024) explains, this "implicit assumption of regulatory validation" discourages consumers from questioning or legally challenging deceptive advertising. Furthermore, India's grievance mechanisms for sustainability-related consumer issues remain "fragmented, under-resourced, and technically inadequate." Together, these conditions include low eco-label literacy, vague legal definitions, dependence on brand trust, and weak enforcement⁴³ explain why the majority of consumers in the present study chose not to pursue legal recourse against deceptive green marketing, allowing greenwashing to persist and erode the credibility of India's sustainability agenda.⁴⁴ Accordingly, most purchasers trust informal indicators such as colour, imagery, and green terms rather than verified certification.⁴⁵

Procedural hurdles under the Consumer Protection Act, 2019, further discourage legal action. Filing a complaint (under Section 35, Consumer Protection Act, 2019) requires documentation, time, and resources that many consumers lack. Consumer grievance redressal commissions are overburdened, resulting in long delays.⁴⁶ Moreover, Senger (2025) observes that the *burden of proof* in greenwashing cases still lies largely on the complainant, making litigation costly and uncertain.⁴⁷ The procedure for redressal under the Consumer Protection Act (2019) requires complainants to present evidence that an advertisement or label is misleading, which in itself acts as a structural barrier. Furthermore, in the absence of a specialised adjudicatory body for environmental marketing claims, cases are caught between the mandates of consumer protection mechanisms and environmental regulatory authorities, leading to jurisdictional overlap and ambiguity.⁴⁸ Therefore, despite regulatory frameworks, the majority

⁴¹ Sanya Darakhshan Kishwar, Vasatika Saraswat, and Roshni Agarwal, "Exploring the True Shade of Green: A Critical Examination of the Central Consumer Protection Authority's Guidelines on Corporate Greenwashing," *International Journal on Consumer Law and Practice* 12 (2024): Article 3, <https://doi.org/10.55496/TAOJ7733>

⁴² Tawallhathai Suphasomboon and Sujitra Vassanadumrongdee, "Perceived Greenwashing and Its Impact on Consumer Behaviour in the Cosmetic Industry," *Cleaner and Responsible Consumption* 20 (2026): 100377, <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.clrc.2025.100377>

⁴³ Jennifer (Yeeun) Huh and Naeun Lauren Kim, "Green as the New Status Symbol: Examining Green Signalling Effects among Gen Z and Millennial Consumers," *Journal of Fashion Marketing and Management: An International Journal* 28, no. 6 (2024): 1237–1255, <https://doi.org/10.1108/JFMM-07-2022-0159>

⁴⁴ According to a YouGov market research study, 71% of Indian consumers reported incidents of greenwashing, with 60% expressing concern. Furthermore, only 29% of consumers reported trusting organisations' environmental claims.

⁴⁵ Kristina R. Dörnyei, et al., "(Not) Communicating the Environmental Friendliness of Food Packaging to Consumers—An Attribute- and Cue-Based Concept and Its Application," *Foods*, 11 (9), 2022, p1371.

⁴⁶ "Justice Delayed: Consumers Caught in a Web of Systemic Inconsistencies." *The Hindu*. 21 December. 2025

⁴⁷ Amy Senger. (2025). "Q&A: Explaining India's New Guidelines to Prevent Greenwashing." *Law.asia*. <https://law.asia/greenwashing-prevention-guidelines/> (accessed 16 January, 2025).

⁴⁸ Aaditya Bhatt. (2025). "CCPA Guidelines on Greenwashing: A Legal Analysis." *Bhatt & Joshi Associates*. <https://bhattandjoshiassociates.com/ccpa-guidelines-on-greenwashing-a-legal-analysis> (accessed 16 January, 2025).

of customers prefer not to pursue legal action after being greenwashed due to poor enforcement, complex procedures, and low public awareness, thereby validating **Hypothesis 3**.

Findings of the Present Study

The findings of the present study, drawn from responses from 125 respondents across different age and income groups, reveal a consistent pattern across all three hypotheses. It reveals that despite the reasonably high awareness of green consumption and greenwashing, there is no proportionate translation into buying behaviour or legal recourse in case of misleading claims. This gap between the two is shaped considerably by differences in income and legal literacy.

With respect to H1, a considerable number of respondents (87%) had general awareness about green consumption and greenwashing, but this consumer awareness, though a necessary condition, is not sufficient in isolation and does not translate into market participation and legal recourse against greenwashing practices.

H2 examined how household income influences access to the green market and affects the degree of exposure to greenwashing. Higher-income respondents were found to have greater access to and active engagement with the green market, whereas low-income respondents were excluded from the green market altogether. Access to the green market is proportional to exposure to greenwashing: higher-income individuals reported more frequent instances of greenwashing, whereas lower-income individuals were shielded from such practices due to their very limited access to the green market.

H3 concerns the relationship between respondents' legal awareness and their willingness to seek redressal for grievances arising from greenwashing. Here, the findings indicated that specific awareness of legal rights, rather than general awareness, is a better predictor of consumers' willingness to seek legal remedies. The finding that only 23.2% of respondents showed readiness to initiate legal action underscores the importance of legal literacy in combating greenwashing.

Table 9: Summary of Hypothesis Testing

Hypothesis	Key Findings	Implication/Status
H1- General awareness of green consumption and greenwashing vs. green purchasing/ legal action	Awareness is widespread (87% of respondents), but this does not automatically translate into regular green purchasing or the pursuit of formal legal remedies.	Awareness alone is a necessary but insufficient condition for both market participation and legal action, demonstrating an initial awareness-action gap
H2- Socio-economic conditioning of awareness and action taken	The awareness-action gap varies across income groups. Higher-income consumers are more engaged in the green market and therefore more exposed to misleading environmental claims, whereas lower-income consumers are often excluded from the green market altogether rather than protected from deception	The awareness-action gap is unevenly distributed across income groups. Household income shapes both exposures to greenwashing and the practical capacity to respond, indicating that socio-economic status conditions consumer vulnerability.

H3- Awareness of legal rights and grievance redressal mechanisms	Only 23.2% of respondents expressed willingness to pursue formal legal action, and this group was concentrated among the more legally aware respondents.	It is legal awareness, rather than general environmental awareness, that predicts willingness to seek formal remedies, highlighting the importance of legal literacy in consumer enforcement.
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Source: Summarised by the Author

Read together, these three hypotheses show that the awareness-action gap identified in this study is not a single issue but rather acts as a bottleneck at every stage: from general awareness to socio-economic engagement, and then to knowledge of legal rights, thereby reducing the number of consumers capable of enforcing their rights at every step. This integrated analysis is possible because the three constructs are tested within a single empirical framework, rather than treated as separate subjects of inquiry. This study makes a significant analytical contribution to the existing literature by critically examining the regulatory framework and identifying gaps in its implementation and enforcement.

CONCLUSION

The research highlights that, despite Indian consumers' high level of awareness of green consumption and greenwashing practices, this awareness is seldom translated into legal action against greenwashing claims. Consumers tend to take action by switching brands, ceasing to purchase goods or services, or simply ignoring greenwashing claims. Older consumers and low-income groups exhibit lower levels of awareness and engagement with green consumption due to limited affordability, limited information, and limited familiarity with brand names. This study shows a clear discrepancy between awareness and action, driven by procedural obstacles, informational imbalance, weak enforcement procedures, and a complex grievance resolution mechanism. Despite the development of the regulatory framework on greenwashing through the enactment of the Consumer Protection Act, 2019, the CCPA Greenwashing Guidelines, 2024, and additional corporate governance and advertising legislation, the implementation of this legislation appears fragmented and insufficient to deter greenwashing.

In order to tackle such issues, India needs to improve its legal system by making the enforcement of the CCPA Greenwashing Guidelines more effective by imposing turnover-related penalties, placing the burden of proving the truthfulness of environmental claims on companies, and mandating the use of Eco Mark labelling for products that claim to be "green," "eco-friendly," or "sustainable." Consumers' complaints system must become more user-friendly through digital and traditional platforms for lodging grievances, as well as by educating consumers about their rights and verifying environmental claims. On the other hand, governments can incentivise sustainable production through carefully monitored tax breaks and subsidies. Ultimately, effective environmental regulation will be possible with the joint effort of regulatory agencies, industry players, certification organisations, investors, civil society, and the media.

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