

Sustainability Between Reality and Illusion: Greenwashing practices in the Case of H&M

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Abstract:

This research paper examines greenwashing practices as a form of environmental deception through a case study of H&M, a global fashion and design company which embraced sustainable fashion initiatives as an environmentally friendly practice. Using a descriptive analytical method, the study assesses the company's sustainability and compliance with environmental standards. The findings reveal that H&M misleads consumers through illusory promotional slogans and recommends curbing unethical marketing practices by strengthening penalties, enforcing deterrent laws and enhancing consumer environmental awareness.

Keywords: sustainability, greenwashing, H&M.

Introduction:

In recent years, environmental issues have gained unprecedented global attention, accompanied by mounting pressure on corporations and the formulation of extensive legal and regulatory frameworks to ensure a clean and safe environment. In response, companies have adopted social responsibility programs that demonstrate their commitment to international quality standards, emissions reduction and waste recycling to achieve sustainability and protect the environment so as to ensure a healthy future for next generations. Nevertheless, some of these initiatives are merely fraudulent practices that employ fake environmental discourse and vague slogans as image enhancement tools, rather than reflecting genuine change in environmental performance. This serious phenomenon, known as greenwashing, has been exposed through consumer experiences and reports of specialized regulatory bodies. These practices translated into raised consumer concern, fear of advertising and distrust in certain corporate products.

The fast fashion industry is one of the industries most associated with greenwashing practices, particularly H&M whose "eco-friendly" campaigns raised widespread controversy regarding its credibility and genuine commitment to environmental standards. This paper, therefore, seeks to examine H&M's practices and assess its environmental sustainability.

Research question:

Based on the above, the research question is as follows:

To what extent do H&M's practices reflect genuine sustainability, rather than mere greenwashing?

Research Hypothesis:

To answer the aforementioned research question, the following hypothesis is formulated:

There is a gap between H&M's environmental marketing discourse and its actual practices.

Importance of the study:

The importance of the study is seen in the significance of greenwashing and its negative repercussions on both the environment and the consumer, resulting in loss of trust in the brand and company itself, in addition to the damage

following legal accountability. The study seeks to raise consumer awareness of the importance of distinguishing between genuine and illusory advertising.

Aims of the study:

Given the paucity of research addressing greenwashing in multinational corporations, this study aims to analyze the environmental marketing practices of one of the world's leading fast fashion corporations. The study aims to:

1. Overview the terms of sustainability and greenwashing as a marketing practice.
2. Highlight H&M's declared environmental initiatives.
3. Assess H&M's sustainability practices as either genuine or illusory.

Methodology:

The research employs a descriptive analytical method for an overview of sustainability and greenwashing related studies. It also proceeds to apply theoretical concepts in the case of H&M by analyzing its marketing practices and assessing the credibility of its sustainability claims before drawing conclusions and providing relevant recommendations.

Structure of the study:

The study is structured as follows:

- Chapter one concerns the definition of sustainability, its dimensions and analysis of greenwashing.
- Chapter two analyzes the environmental marketing discourse of H&M.
- Chapter three presents the findings and recommendations of the study.

Chapter one: the theoretical framework of sustainability and greenwashing

1.1) definition of sustainability:

Over the past three decades, terms related to corporate sustainability, particularly in their environmental dimension, have been increasingly used. These terms refer to the products' environmental friendliness and the corporation's commitment to protecting the environment from all forms of pollution. Several definitions of sustainability have been advanced, the most influential of which is that of the *Brundtland Commission*, officially the *World Commission on Environment and Development* (WCED), that was introduced in its 1987 report entitled "*Our Common Future*" which defines sustainability as: "Development that meets the needs of the present without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs." (Ali, 2022, p. 274)

Similarly, the World Bank defines sustainability as "Development that focuses on achieving continuous equity, ensuring that future generations have access to the same opportunities for advancement as the present generation, by maintaining or increasing comprehensive capital over time."

Economist Robert E. Solow defines sustainability as the action of "not harming the production capacity of future generations and leaving it in the condition inherited by the current generation." (Ali, 2022, p. 275)

These definitions collectively portray sustainability as the protection of the planet from toxic and polluting emissions, the rational use of energy, the transition toward renewable energy resources and the promotion of sound environmental behaviors, thereby enabling future generations to meet their needs.

1.2) Dimensions of sustainability:

Sustainability covers three interconnected dimensions that collectively contribute to the preservation of the Earth's resources for future generations:

Human sustainability: this dimension focuses on developing individuals' capacities to serve both themselves and their communities, by improving educational, cultural and healthcare services, in addition to fulfilling individuals' material, psychological, spiritual and social welfare needs.

Economic sustainability: this dimension seeks to improve production modes, increase national income, fight against poverty and build effective institutions, while ensuring social justice in the distribution of wealth.

Environmental sustainability: this dimension focuses on protecting the environment and conserving natural resources from pollution and extinction. It involves protecting water resources, agricultural land and forests, reducing pesticide use and adopting advanced technologies that increase productivity and conserve livestock.

1.3) The difference between genuine sustainability and illusory sustainability

Based on the foregoing, genuine sustainability refers to honest and transparent marketing practices, supported by officially recognized certifications issued by governments and competent bodies, reflecting social, economic and environmental responsibilities. In contrast, illusory sustainability consists of deceptive claims aimed at misleading consumers for marketing and image enhancement purposes. These definitions help distinguish between the two terms using a set of evaluative criteria, as presented in the table below:

Table 1: The difference between genuine sustainability and illusory sustainability

Criterion	Genuine sustainability	Illusory Sustainability
Transparency	High level of transparency through the disclosure of clear and accurate data regarding activities, products, product composition, sourcing, etc.	Low transparency level due to the provision of false, ambiguous or difficult to verify data
Practices	Implementing practices for environmental protection such as waste recycling, low-carbon manufacturing technologies and the use of alternative renewable energy	Adopting fake slogans such as “sustainable”, “eco-friendly”, “natural” or “green” without real action
Evidence	Availability of credible evidence issued by independent private and governmental bodies, including certifications and periodic reports	Lack of supporting evidence or falsification of certification
Consumer relationships	Long-term relationships based on trust and brand loyalty, fostered through communication and interaction to exchange insights and ideas on product development	Short-term relationships due to loss of trust in the company’s environmental discourse, reputational damage and lack of genuine interaction via the official website, relying instead on social media platforms
Product pricing	Higher prices reflect higher production costs of higher quality products	Affordable and attractive prices with no added environmental value

Source: Developed by the researchers, based on the review of theoretical literature

1.4) The concept and forms of greenwashing

The concept of greenwashing was coined in the 1980s, first introduced by environmental activist Jay Westerveld in 1986 in New York to criticize certain hotels that placed deceptive green cards in every hotel room to implore guests to reuse towels. (Muqri, 2014, p. 147)

In 1992, research published in the *Journal of Public Policy and Marketing*, issued by the *American Marketing Association (AMA)*, reported that 85% of environmental advertisements contained at least one misleading claim. In 1998, the *U.S. Federal Trade Commission* released the *Green Guides* to clarify terminology used in green marketing. The following year, the term greenwashing was incorporated into the *Oxford English Dictionary*. (Meriem, 2022, p. 184)

This chronology indicates that researchers in marketing and environmental sustainability as well as international bodies showed interest in greenwashing relatively recently, which explains the diversity of definitions regarding the phenomenon, some of which are presented below:

The United Nations Environment Programme (UNEP) refers to brainwashing as: “Communication processes used by organizations to promote social and environmental commitments in the absence of supportive actions”. (Meriem, 2022, p. 184)

Additionally, greenwashing has been described as “The deceptive representation of a product or an organization’s environmental characteristics, particularly when actions or characteristics fail to reflect the actions or characteristics accurately. It also refers to the deliberate distortion of concepts by organizations using various communication strategies, particularly through advertising and packaging.” (Salim Hamidani, 2019, p. 345)

Greenwashing is also defined as “a form of information dissemination directed at the public which involves the distortion of facts to portray the company as socially friendly, human-centered and environmentally responsible to the audience”. (Bourzik Khaira, 2020, p. 158)

From the above definitions, several conclusions can be drawn:

- greenwashing is a form of false marketing and an application of Consumer Deception Theory in the environmental realm. Accordingly, the company projects a positive image by providing incomplete, selectively framed or ambiguous information, thereby distorting consumer perceptions about the product’s properties and environmental impacts. In reality, the company’s activities and products do not meet environment protection standards.
- companies invest heavily in advertising to bolster their image and exaggerate their environmental and symbolic value without making real improvements to their actual environmental value. This creates a perceived value gap between the promised value gap through marketing materials and the actual value experienced after consumption, ultimately resulting in dissatisfaction, diminished trust and weakened brand loyalty.
- the concealment of product flaws or manufacturing processes as well as obscuring real information infringes upon consumers’ fundamental right to knowledge. It constitutes a fraudulent practice that is punishable by law and may expose companies to judicial accountability.

The major forms of greenwashing have been addressed in a *Terrachoice* report entitled “*The Sins of Greenwashing: Home and Family Edition*”. The environmental marketing agency identified seven sins of greenwashing that give a false impression that the corporation is socially environmentally responsible and fall into the forms of illusory sustainability as follows:

- **The sin of the hidden trade-off:** the sin of the hidden trade-off is one of the most common greenwashing sins according to the agency which means claiming that a product is environmentally friendly and sustainable based on a single environmental attribute, while ignoring other environmental issues and concealing the harmful aspects of the product.
- **The sin of no proof:** the no proof sin refers to the use of misleading environmental claims such as “eco-friendly”, “recyclable” or “green” without verifiable certifications or official reports.
- **The sin of vagueness:** the sin of vagueness refers to making misleading sustainability claims using vague terminology that allows multiple interpretations leading to common misunderstanding such as “eco-friendly”, “green”, “sustainable” and “clean”.
- **The sin of irrelevance:** the sin of irrelevance describes making truthful environmental claims that are trivial or irrelevant to consumers.
- **The sin of the lesser of two evils:** the sin of the lesser of two evils corresponds to making true environmental claims compared to worse products, while the marketed product is inherently harmful to the consumer.
- **The sin of fibbing:** the sin of fibbing entails making false or illusory claims and falsifying certifications by changing the brand name or product name to give the impression that the products are natural, organic or biodegradable. It also includes using green tones or images on the product or the packaging to suggest that it is ecofriendly.
- **The sin of worshipping false labels:** the sin of worshipping false labels describes the display of false environmental certification logos from independent third-party authorities to mislead consumers.

1.5) Motives of greenwashing

Firms resort to greenwashing to secure the marketing benefits of sustainability without incurring its real cost. Key motives of greenwashing are:

- Attracting consumers by using vague sustainability terminology in slogans and advertising, such as “eco-friendly”, “ecological” or “recycled materials”.
- Circumventing the substantial costs required for true sustainable transformation, including changing production lines, enhancing supply chains, investing in sustainable materials or reducing production volumes.
- Increasing sales and maximizing profits, given that green products are marketed at higher prices.
- Maintaining market share in industries where rivals adopt credible sustainable practices.
- Improving consumers’ perception of the company’s marketing image, building long-term consumer trust as well as mitigating societal and media pressure amidst growing criticism.
- Lack of strict legislation and insufficient oversight which encourage companies to disseminate misleading environmental discourse.
- Evading or postponing compliance to the requirements of strict environmental authorities, such as environment protection associations or consumer protection organizations. (Saad, 2025)

Chapter two: Analysis of the environmental marketing discourse of H&M

1.2) sustainability applications in the global fashion industry

The fashion industry ranks among the world’s largest and most influential sectors in economic, cultural and environmental terms with an annual worth exceeding USD 2.5 trillion. The fashion industry provides employment for more than 300 million people worldwide and comprises several sectors, most notably luxury fashion and fast fashion.

Luxury fashion is dominated by prestigious international fashion houses such as Chanel, Dior and Gucci. It is characterized by high-quality production, premium pricing and strong demand among affluent consumers worldwide.

Fast fashion, on the other hand, is built on mass production, accelerated production cycles (releasing new products every three to five weeks) and rapid distribution at low prices. Prominent fast fashion brands include Shein, Zara and H&M.

From an economic sustainability perspective, the fashion industry is witnessing significant growth across the world and stands as an important source of income for national economies. However, from an environmental perspective, the fashion industry is the second most polluting industry after the oil industry as it requires large amounts of water and energy. For instance, manufacturing a single cotton t-shirt requires over 2,700 liters of water. Furthermore, textile dyeing processes are responsible for releasing toxic chemicals and account for approximately 10% of global carbon emissions. The fashion industry is also a major generator of waste as 92 million tons of clothing are being discarded annually, the majority of which is not recycled.

From a social perspective, the fashion industry, particularly in developing countries and Asian countries such as India, Vietnam and Bangladesh, suffers from several dysfunctions, including low wages, child labor, long working hours and inadequate occupational health and safety standards. For instance, the Rana Plaza disaster, an eight-story garment factory group that collapsed on April 24, 2013 in Bangladesh, resulting in the death of 1,129 workers, stands as a stark illustration of the dysfunctions of the fashion industry. (Al Jazeera, 2023)

Based on the above, we note that the social and environmental aspects are not being respected in the fashion industry. In response, a global shift towards sustainable fashion emerged. The latter employs new manufacturing methods to preserve natural resources while sustaining economic growth. This new trend also aims to raise consumer awareness about sustainability and foster more informed and responsible choices. Additionally, sustainable fashion also seeks to increase product durability as well as its functional and aesthetic values.

2.2) Overview of H&M

H&M is a leading multinational fast fashion and design company, founded in 1947 by Erling Persson in Västerås, Sweden. The company initially operated a single women's apparel store under the name "Hennes" ("hers" in Swedish) before expanding to include men's apparel after acquiring the hunting supplies store Mauritz Widforss, thereby becoming Hennes & Mauritz (H&M).

H&M operates according to a fast fashion business model which entails releasing new designs frequently at affordable prices, thereby targeting all price ranges. This business model has enabled rapid international expansion with the brand operating approximately 5,000 stores across 79 international markets, in addition to 60 online markets by 2025.

H&M generates substantial revenues through trendy designs offered at accessible prices that appeal to a wide consumer base. Nevertheless, it remains one of the most controversial fast fashion brands. The company's business model has been widely criticized for contributing to environmental degradation through accelerated production cycles, large-scale waste generation and overconsumption of resources.

2.3) Analysis of H&M environmental marketing practices

To examine H&M environmental marketing practices, the study adopts a two-dimensional analytical framework focusing on product composition and manufacturing methods. The analysis draws on sustainability reports published on the official website since 2013, reports issued by certain international bodies, in addition to qualitative content analysis that was conducted on selected H&M's advertisements released between 2013 and 2025 to answer the following questions:

Product composition and manufacturing methods

- What is the proportion of sustainable production lines compared to the total manufacturing lines?
- How are materials used in garment manufacturing sources? And how durable are they? In other words, what is their estimated lifespan?
- Does the company reduce waste during manufacturing or after sale, and is it recycled?
- How transparent is the supply chain, and can it contribute to reducing carbon emissions?
- Does the company rely on intensive production with negative impacts on the environment?

Advertising campaigns

- Do advertisement campaigns employ misleading emotionally charged marketing with flashy terminology such as natural, green, pure and healthy?
- Do the campaigns use fashion images in green tones?

2.3.1) Analysis by product composition and manufacturing methods

In February 2013, H&M announced its commitment to sustainability by launching the Conscious Collection claiming to have changed its production and manufacturing methods by using ecofriendly, sustainably sourced materials or recycled materials such as organic unblended cotton, linen, silk and recycled polyester. This initiative reinforces H&M's commitment to part with virgin petroleum-based polyester that releases microplastics and other harmful chemicals in washing cycles. H&M social responsibility reports also indicate efforts to reduce supply chain greenhouse emissions with a net zero target by 2030. H&M also supports factories transitioning to renewable energy, with 96% of electricity sourced from renewables in 2016 and it has collected more than 29,000 tons of clothing for recycling purposes in 2013. (Yalova, 2025, p. 14)

H&M's annual sustainability report of 2024 addressed the green fashion initiative which was implemented following these measures: (H&M, 2024)

- Installing energy management systems and insulating dyeing and steam equipment
- Replacing outdated washing machinery with modern fully insulated ones

- Replacing fossil-fuel powered dyeing equipment with alternative electrically powered machines using radiofrequency technology
- Collaborating with the WorldWide Fund of Nature (WWF) to implement regenerative cotton farming practices, including organic fertilizers, biological alternatives to synthetic fungicides, supporting farmer livelihoods and protecting wildlife corridors, such as the tiger corridor in Satpura Bench, India.
- Encouraging sheep farmers to ensure wool production without soil degradation.

Although these measures suggest environmental responsibility and earn the firm a positive eco-friendly reputation, they dissimulate the perpetuation of an unsustainable fast fashion business model. Investigations and reports issued by international bodies, such as the Norwegian Consumer Council and NGOs including Earthsight revealed the following facts:

- No official figure is provided on the number of sustainable lines relative to total production lines is declared in official reports. Only the Conscious line is labelled as sustainable, representing only a small fraction of the total production line. (Károly, 2025, p. 55)
- Garments are made from petroleum-based polyester or nylon which are unsustainable because they require a long time before they can be reused or recycled.
- The proportion of recycled materials is very low, only 5% of polyester is recycled. Moreover, recent studies affirm that garments made from recycled polyester release millions of microplastic particles during washing cycles which contaminate water, soil and the food chain. (Green Future, 2025)
- H&M relies on synthetic fibers such as polyester which releases very high carbon emissions in production cycles compared to natural fibers. In addition, the production method is unsustainable as raw materials are transported to manufacturing sites and products are shipped to consumer markets (long globalized supply chains) which increases carbon emissions in shipping and transport. Moreover, independent reports reveal that H&M carbon emissions reached 5.7 million tons of CO₂ in 2024, compared to previous years.
- According to an Earthsight report entitled Fashion Crimes, released on April 11, 2024, H&M uses cotton linked to illegal deforestation in Brazil's Cerrado, revealing unsustainable and unethical supply practices.
- Intensive annual garment production of approximately 3 billion garments, according to non-official sources; a figure that is not disclosed by H&M for commercial confidentiality and competition purposes. This production method increases demand for resources, energy and transportation, perpetuating environmental damage.

2.3.2) Analysis by Advertising

H&M advertising illustrates several misleading practices which indicate a significant disconnect between marketing claims and the actual environmental impacts of products. The corporation's advertisements are either false, distorting facts and lacking accuracy and objectivity or vague, ambiguous terms that mislead consumers by failing to provide clear information about the environmental properties of products, rendering these claims empty promises. Below is a detailed analysis of these advertisements:

- H&M advertisements use green cues which signal green products and employ emotive language such as "sustainable", "natural", "recycled" and "responsible" to appeal to consumers (Figure 1). For instance, the Conscious Line is marketed as eco-friendly, while containing items made entirely of polyester, a non-biodegradable material that contributes to microplastic pollution.

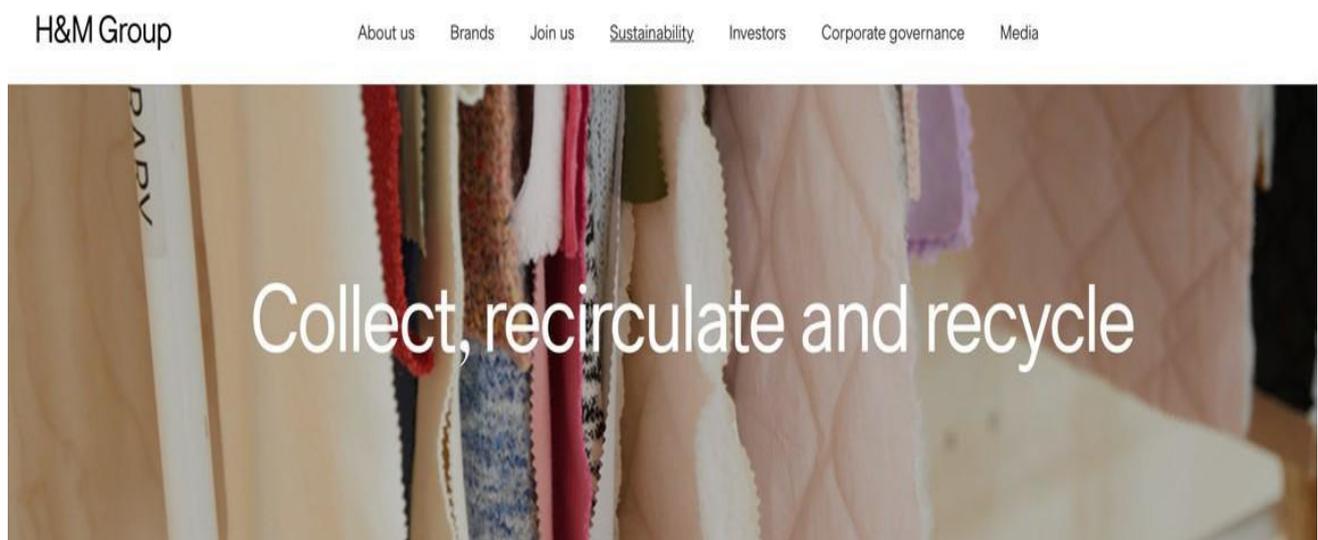
Figure 1: Advertisement of Sustainable Fashion Using Green Cues



Source: <https://www.pinterest.com/pin/929500810643737062/>

- H&M also runs advertising campaigns encouraging consumers to recycle old clothing through H&M collection program, offering incentives in the form of discount vouchers under the motto “Collect, Recirculate and Recycle” (Figure 2). This is another false claim as only a small fraction of collected garments is effectively recycled; the remainder is re-sold as second-hand clothing or sometimes rejected by some stores. Recycling blended fabrics such as cotton-polyester blends is a challenging process because of the tightly intertwined fibers. Using the term “recycling”, therefore, is misleading because it oversimplifies the challenges of the process and current technological limitations.

Figure 2: Recycling Motto on H&M Official Website



Source: <https://hmgroup-com>

- H&M engages in controversial promotional campaigns, including a videogame-themed sustainability island and featuring celebrities to promote it. The use of visually appealing, nature-themed imagery in these campaigns may enhance consumer environmental perceptions of the brand, but simultaneously conceal the absence of genuine environmental commitment.

Figure 3: Loop Island Campaign



Source : (Angela Azizah Paramita, 2025, p. 5)

3.3) Greenwashing sins at H&M

An analysis of H&M products, production methods and advertising reveal several misleading practices, otherwise labeled as greenwashing sins, detailed below:

- **The sin of the hidden trade-off:** The Conscious Line falls under “the hidden trade-off” fallacy. H&M is not fully transparent about what is considered organic material, how clothes are recycled before being introduced to the collection or the production carbon footprint. No clear data is provided regarding the sustainability of this line or the broader environmental impact of overall production.
- **The sin of no proof:** H&M does not provide any transparent evidence or third-party certification attesting its actual environmental impact and sustainability.
- **The sin of vagueness:** H&M frequently uses generic and undefined terms such as “eco-friendly” or “sustainable” without specifying their meaning, leading to consumer confusion and misinformed decisions.
- **The sin of irrelevance:** H&M highlights minor improvements, such as eco-friendly packaging and energy-efficient lighting with disregard to core environmental issues, such as global supply chain unsustainability. It is to be noted that although these initiatives are steps in the right direction, they do not address any systemic issues such as the environmental consequences of overproduction and fast fashion on water, energy and other resources.
- **The sin of the lesser of two evils:** H&M advertising may present some products as more sustainable, such as garments made from recycled polyester, despite containing harmful synthetic compounds. Likewise, the *Better Cotton Initiative (BCI)* perpetuates negative practices, including synthetic pesticide use, genetically modified seeds (Dobriva, 2019) and deforestation in the tropical rainforests.
- **The sin of fibbing:** H&M claims that all its products are fully recyclable, whereas only a small fraction is recycled.

Conclusion:

This study concludes that H&M has engaged in environmental misleading practices that violate international legal principles, reflected in overstated claims and declarations, ambiguous information and exaggerated brand image. A review of the corporation’s practices clearly indicates that sustainability and circular economy are framed as central strategies, while in reality they are based on illusory sustainability. In the same vein, studies show that these are marketing tactics aimed at exploiting consumer environmental concern, bolstering the firm’s public image and turning a quick profit without genuine environmental commitment. This marks a stark disconnect between H&M marketing discourse and actual operational practices, supporting the research hypothesis.

Genuine sustainability requires more than just slogans; it requires transparency, credible marketing discourse, a transformation of the operational business model, a reduction in production speed and volume as well as other recommended initiatives, listed below:

- Strengthening legislation and oversight to require firms to fully disclose environmental practices and provide accurate evidence from independent bodies.
- Raising consumer awareness of the importance of distinguishing between genuine and fake environmental discourse as well as encouraging critical review of environmental marketing slogans and seeking tangible evidence.
- Enforcing legal frameworks against deceptive advertising and marketing, and strictly addressing any fraudulent claims of environmental protection in production activities.
- Fostering environmental culture and awareness among all segments of society to verify advertising information, supporting a culture of litigation and prosecution against greenwashing practices, in coordination with civil society actors.

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