NEWS LESSON

Greenwashing: When Eco-Friendly Claims Do Not Add Up



BEFORE YOU READ

1 Warm up

Talk about these questions with a partner.

1. Which words on a product make it sound environmentally friendly?
2. Do you trust a simple green label or want more detail?
3. Would a smaller choice of well-explained products make shopping easier?

2 Key words

These words are in the article. Write the letter of the meaning (A to H) in each box.

1	**impression**	☐	A	an official body that makes sure companies follow the rules
2	**emissions**	☐	B	laws made by a government
3	**regulator**	☐	C	balancing harm by paying for something good elsewhere
4	**complaints**	☐	D	gases released into the air by vehicles, factories and planes
5	**legislation**	☐	E	the idea or feeling you get about something
6	**offsetting**	☐	F	choosing only some things and ignoring others
7	**sustainable**	☐	G	able to continue without damaging the environment
8	**selective**	☐	H	statements that you are not happy about something

3 Read

Read the article and underline the key words from task 2. The paragraphs are numbered.

Shoppers respond to the story an advertisement tells, not to a company's full environmental record. That gap is where the claim does its work.

1 A shopper reaches for the bottle with leaves on the label. A traveller chooses the flight described as climate-conscious. Neither person has time to investigate a company's entire environmental record; they respond to the story the advertisement tells. That is what makes greenwashing effective. The claim does not always need to be completely false. It only needs to create a greener impression than the evidence can support.

2 Sometimes the trick is selective attention. A fashion brand promotes recycled packaging while saying little about the volume of clothes it produces. A retailer celebrates one sustainable collection while encouraging customers to buy more than they need. The positive detail may be genuine, but it can distract from a much larger environmental cost. What is left out of the frame matters as much as what is put in it. A single green detail can carry a whole advertisement, even when the rest of the business has barely changed.

3 Air travel offers a useful example. In July 2026, Britain's Advertising Standards Authority upheld complaints about environmental claims made by Eurowings and Qatar Airways. Their advertisements gave the impression that customers could pay towards projects that fully compensated for the emissions from flights. The regulator found that the companies had not provided enough evidence to support that impression. Environmental projects may do valuable work, but they do not automatically cancel out the impact of a particular journey.

Sources: UK Advertising Standards Authority. Picture: AI illustration.

4 Regulators have become increasingly concerned about vague promises. New European Union consumer rules, which began applying in September 2026, restrict general environmental claims that companies cannot properly support. The legislation also addresses unreliable sustainability labels and certain claims of climate neutrality based on offsetting. The aim is to stop companies gaining an advantage simply by choosing attractive green language.

5 However, understanding environmental impact is not always straightforward. A product may use less plastic but require more energy to make. A delivery company may reduce emissions on one route while expanding its overall business. Consumers cannot be expected to become experts in climate science every time they shop, which is why accurate information and independent checks matter. Without them, the most confident advertiser tends to win out, rather than the most responsible one.

6 There are practical ways to be more careful. Look for specific figures rather than broad promises, and check whether a claim has been independently verified. Ask whether the advertised improvement concerns the whole product or just one part of it. Companies deserve recognition for genuine progress, but they also need to acknowledge what has not improved. Buying something with a green label should not require an act of faith. If a business makes an environmental promise, it should be able to back it up.

4 True, false or not given

Circle **T** (true), **F** (false) or **NG** (the article does not say).

1. The regulator decided that Eurowings and Qatar Airways had provided enough evidence for their claims. T F NG
2. An advertisement can seem green because of one detail, even if the rest of the business has barely changed. T F NG
3. Most airlines have stopped using offsetting claims since July 2026. T F NG
4. A product that uses less plastic always has a lower overall environmental impact. T F NG
5. The new European Union rules also cover unreliable sustainability labels. T F NG

5 Vocabulary

Complete the sentences with words from the box. Two words are not needed.

acknowledge	advantage	distract	genuine	overlook	reluctant	vague	verified

1. She felt sure the manager's concern for the environment was _____ , not just good public relations.
2. 'Kinder to nature' is too _____ to tell shoppers anything useful.
3. Before you trust a figure, check that it has been independently _____ .
4. The company should _____ that some parts of the product still harm the environment.
5. A flashy slogan can _____ shoppers from the real cost of a product.
6. A business that appears greener can gain an _____ over its competitors.

6 Verb forms

Write the correct form of the verb in brackets.

1. By the time she reached the till, the shopper _____ to buy the greener bottle. (DECIDE)
2. Claims that cannot be proved _____ under the new rules. (RESTRICT)
3. At the moment the message arrived, the shopper _____ two bottles. (COMPARE)
4. In July 2026, Britain's regulator _____ complaints about two airlines. (UPHOLD)
5. Regulators _____ increasingly concerned about vague promises. (BECOME)

7 Language focus: linking words

Complete the sentences with words from the box. Two words are not needed. Check the logic. Whereas shows a contrast between two things, provided adds a condition, and despite needs a noun or an -ing form.

despite	however	otherwise	provided	therefore	unless	whereas

1. _____ being technically accurate, the advert left a false impression.
2. Some shoppers read every label, _____ others simply trust the packaging.
3. Customers cannot check every claim; _____ , independent checks are important.
4. A product may use less plastic. _____ , it may need more energy to make.
5. Companies can advertise their progress, _____ they stay honest about the limits.

SPEAK

8 Talk about it

Discuss in pairs or small groups. Give reasons for your answers.

1. What would a useful environmental label actually tell you?
2. Who should have to prove a green claim is true?
3. Would you trust a brand more if it admitted where it still caused harm?

9 Role-play: which bottle should we buy?

Work in pairs. Read your card, then have the conversation. Swap roles and do it again.

Student A · the shopper

You are in a shop with a friend. You want to buy the bottle with green leaves and the word eco on it. Explain why you like it and why you think it is a good choice.

Student B · the friend

You are not sure the label is true. Ask what the label really proves. Ask at least two questions, then decide together which bottle to buy.

Useful phrases

I'd like to buy this one, it looks greener.
What's the label actually telling us?
That doesn't prove anything.
I'm not sure we can trust it.
Let's check the figures before we decide.
Shall we buy the plain one instead?

Afterwards, tell the class which bottle you chose and why.

ANSWER KEY

2 Key words

1 E · 2 D · 3 A · 4 H · 5 B · 6 C · 7 G · 8 F

4 True, false or not given

1 F · 2 T · 3 NG · 4 F · 5 T

5 Vocabulary

1 genuine · 2 vague · 3 verified · 4 acknowledge · 5 distract · 6 advantage

6 Verb forms

1 had decided · 2 are restricted · 3 was comparing · 4 upheld · 5 have become

7 Language focus

1 Despite · 2 whereas · 3 therefore · 4 However · 5 provided

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