



# ECO-ILLUSION

Whether you're strolling through the supermarket or scrolling on Amazon, chances are you'll see dozens of products **claiming** to be "sustainably sourced," "green," "compostable" or "made from 100% recycled materials." They cost more than the next product because they are **marketed** as **eco-friendly**. But **are they really?**

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## What is greenwashing?

According to Renato Molina, a professor at University of Miami's Rosenstiel School of Marine and Atmospheric Science, greenwashing can be defined as “firms engaging in false advertisement to make them seem more environmentally friendly than they actually are.”

It's a tactic that essentially misleads consumers into buying products because they believe it's less harmful or even helpful to the environment. In fact, the 2019 Retail and Sustainability Survey by consulting firm CGS found that 35% of consumers would pay a quarter more than the original price of a given product for an eco-friendly alternative. Many corporations are capitalizing on that desire—minus the eco-friendly part.

The term greenwashing was coined in the 80s by environmentalist Jay Westerveld, according to a 2016 *Guardian* article by Bruce Watson. The idea came to Westerveld when he snuck into a resort in Fiji to steal clean towels. He noticed the hotel had claimed to want to reduce waste by asking customers to reuse the towels, but was simultaneously expanding their real estate, harming the surrounding beaches.

Roughly 40 years later, the practice described by this term is still being employed by some of the world's largest companies. In a world where millions are spent on campaigns developed by experts, it falls on consumers to figure out what products are actually sustainable—and whether this matter is of concern to them in the first place.

“I usually don't check to see if the clothes I buy are sustainable,” said UM sophomore Sarah Prior. “I avoid websites that have a bad reputation, but I trust the brands that I like.”

## How can you spot it?

Some ways to spot greenwashing include looking for buzzwords or images of nature in advertisements and checking to see if a “sustainable” brand is owned by a large corporation with a history of harmful environmental practices, according to a 2021 *BBC* article by Beth Timmons.

One common tactic is promoting products as “100% sustainable” or “ethically sourced.” Another is advertising a single sustainable effort or campaign while simultaneously engaging in other practices that harm the environment.

For example, the *Guardian* article said that hardware stores like Lowes and Home Depot advertise on-site recycling to their customers. However, these same stores sell billions of dollars worth of environmentally damaging products such as toxic paints.

Molina cited multiple other instances. “Ikea claimed to use only sustainably-sourced wood, but in 2020 it was discovered that the company sourced illegally-logged wood from Ukraine,” he said.

Molina said businesses like Ikea validate the sustainability of their materials through certification companies in an attempt to seem more legitimate.

“I would be cautious to take any random certification at face value.” In 2018, Molina continued, “Starbucks claimed to get rid of straws, but their new strawless lid had more and harder-to-recycle plastic in it than their previous lids and straws combined.”

Not every company that claims to be “eco-friendly” is full of it; there is a distinction between “greenwashing” and “green marketing,” according to a 2021 *Eco-Watch* article by Lydia Noyes.

A truly green product, Noyes explained, tends to arrive in minimal packaging, is free of toxic materials, built to last and repairable. She said outdoor apparel company Patagonia is a classic example of a real “green” company. Its buildings, she said, run on renewable

energy, their clothing is made using over 80% recycled materials and they have a “cradle-to-grave” approach for clothing that offers a lifetime of repairs, ensuring customers can reuse instead of re-buy.

## What does it mean for the climate crisis?

According to Greg Hamra, climate educator and leader of the Citizen's Climate Lobby (CCL) in Miami, most consumers are misinformed about their role in the climate crisis. Since the 70s, he said, large corporations have diverted our attention away from their carbon emissions, including through corporate-sponsored public service announcements.

Rather than focusing on the role of corporations, this type of messaging shifts the responsibility for climate change to relatively smaller individual decisions.

One example, he said, is a “Keep America Beautiful” commercial from the 70s which features a Native American man crying about pollution and littering. The campaign was part of an orchestrated public relations strategy to turn the public's attention toward littering, recycling and environmental matters of less consequence than the burning of fossil fuels. Hamra said he calls this “The Great Bamboozlement.”

But consumers can avoid this trap. CCL's Higher Education Team, he said, encourages people to be more civically engaged and to vote for politicians who believe in climate change and want to solve the problem. He said our role as consumers is not only to reduce our carbon footprints, but also to become better informed about how companies who extract fossil fuels maintain their power in politics and the economy. 🌱

▼ COCA-COLA WAS sued by the Earth Island Institute in 2021 for deceptively marketing itself as sustainable. Ironically, the brand was named worst plastic polluter for three years by Break Free From Plastic.

