



THE IMPACT OF GREENWASHING IN THE COSMETIC INDUSTRY, PARTICULARLY FOCUSING ON A REAL-WORLD CASE (INNISFREE'S GREEN FOREST CAMPAIGN)

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Abstract

Innisfree's Green Forest campaign promotes ecological awareness, but its sustainability claims are contradicted by the use of plastic in its packaging. Therefore, this study aims to expose the greenwashing practices employed by Innisfree. This study examines the impact of Innisfree's greenwashing on its brand image. This case study used an ecolinguistics framework by Fill & Mühlhäusler (2001) to reveal how Innisfree's environmental narratives were constructed and what strategies they used to attract their customers back. As per the Method section, the data were Instagram comments and their sales performance data. The analysis was conducted in 4 steps: (1) examining Innisfree's Instagram posts that had been targeted by netizen criticism, (2) categorizing netizens' comments into deception, loss of trust, and demand for transparency, (3) evaluating the alignment between Innisfree's environmental messaging and consumer responses, and (4) assessing the impact of greenwashing on sales. This study highlights that the environmentally friendly language used in advertisements—often disguised as campaigns—serves a specific purpose within the ecolinguistics conception, which is to persuade people to follow the advertisement's intended message. The findings indicate that greenwashing negatively impacted Innisfree's brand image, however, the use of influencers successfully mitigated the damage caused by the scandal.

Keywords: eco-advertising, ecolinguistics, green commercial advertising, greenwashing, Innisfree

Introduction

Environment is one of the most essential things in life; its conditions determine how living things can survive on Earth. Living creatures, including humans, exist if the environment can provide the needs of living things, such as safe places, food, water, and so forth (Astini, 2016). However, almost every human behavior has a negative impact on the environment through environmental pollution. Environmental pollution has become an increasingly pressing issue that warrants concern among humans. People cannot pretend to be ignorant of human activities, such as deforestation, landfills, illegal dumping, industrial effluents, and harmful materials, which have caused serious damage to both the environment and



other living creatures (Ukaogo et al., 2020). As a result, the environment, which should be a support system for life, has instead become a threat to living things due to environmental damage.

Due to environmental changes, such as global warming, plastic waste, sea level rise, and environmental pollution, society has begun to recognize the need for preventive measures to protect the natural environment. As environmental awareness has increased in recent years, it has altered people's, especially consumers', consumption choices and patterns. Consumers are increasingly concerned about the environmental impact of their consumption behavior. People are starting to take "go green" actions that increase the demand for environmentally friendly products. (Olk, 2021). One of the actions is that consumers nowadays search for items that are environmentally friendly, healthful, and chemical-free (Singh et al., 2019).

The increasing demand for environmentally friendly products has led companies to offer products labeled as such, demonstrating their commitment to managing product waste and protecting the environment, particularly those that previously offered environmentally unfriendly products (Neureiter & Matthes, 2023). This phenomenon has also prompted companies to adjust their strategies by incorporating nature-related language into their advertisements (ads). The purpose is to construct a green brand image for customers. A green brand image is a brand that conveys to consumers a perception related to the combination of commitment and environmental concern (Maharani, 2020). This green brand image fosters a positive perception among consumers, which can enhance the overall brand image of a product.

Companies try new ways to distinguish their products in the environmental era. Green marketing has become an effective solution to approach consumers who are concerned about the environment. Therefore, many companies worldwide are shifting their strategies toward environmental sustainability. Consequently, companies use specific messages such as "eco", "environmentally friendly", "green", "earth friendly", and "sustainability" to promote their green products (Chen & Chang, 2012). Moreover, the environmental movement is gaining popularity worldwide. This ultimately requires companies to build a green brand image through green marketing.

However, some companies use nature-related advertising to attract buyers to purchase their products even if they are not as "green" as advertised. False green advertising gives customers a misleading impression of being eco-friendly. Hence, this advertisement can be categorized as a common form of greenwashing since it ignores crucial information that customers need to make an informed purchase decision (Neureiter et al., 2024). Greenwashing is a deceptive behavior where green marketing or green public relations (green PR) is misleadingly used to construct the perception that a company's products, brands, or services are environmentally friendly (Chen et al., 2018). The increase in greenwashing would affect customers' skepticism toward all environmental claims, decreasing their ability to influence companies to adopt sustainable practices in business operations and manufacturing.

In an article written by Raihana and Purwanegara (2023), it is discussed how greenwashing perception affects consumer repurchasing intentions for green personal body care products. The study used a survey method with 108 respondents

who were consumers of environmentally friendly body care products. According to the survey, greenwashing negatively impacted the green brand image. However, consumers did not immediately reject products that engaged in greenwashing, and consequently, repurchases were still made. This study further demonstrated that word of mouth also contributed to shaping consumer attitudes toward green personal body care products, suggesting that even though the product employed greenwashing, consumers were still willing to repurchase due to the quality of the products.

Majláth (2017) also examines how greenwashing information in advertisements influences consumers' perceptions of the brand. Majláth found that when consumers consider greenwashing practices, they tend to be critical of the brand involved. Majláth concludes that the perception of greenwashing can destroy consumer trust if detected; however, some consumers are not yet familiar with greenwashing practices, hence the negative effects may be limited to a specific group.

While previous studies have explored the impact of greenwashing on brand perception, limited attention has been paid to how companies strategically recover from greenwashing crises by utilizing influencer marketing in the beauty sector. Additionally, the previous studies do not comprehensively address the linguistic and communication strategies used in sustainability marketing that shape consumer perceptions. It is rare for research to examine how ecolinguistic elements, such as word choice, imagery, and framing in green marketing, contribute to either strengthening or mitigating perceptions of greenwashing. Understanding the cooperation between ecolinguistics elements and influencer-driven marketing can open deeper insights into the effects of greenwashing practices and how brands maintain consumer loyalty.

Based on the background described, this study aims to examine how Innisfree's green marketing messages affect consumer perspective through ecolinguistics analysis. Specifically, it seeks to answer (1) how Innisfree's greenwashing incident affects its brand image and (2) how the use of celebrity endorsement mitigates the impact. In this study, the analyzed object was the green tea serum skincare product from the Innisfree brand, packaged in its own brand. This research employed a case study that was based on the ecolinguistics framework from Fill and Mühlhäusler (2001) to analyze Innisfree's scandal news and the netizens' comments on Innisfree's Instagram, specifically targeting customers of Innisfree's skincare products. The comments on Instagram were taken because they were identified as reactions from Innisfree customers regarding the brand's greenwashing practices.

Green brand images

A brand is a crucial element in a product. The presence of a brand on a product will provide a message and awareness in the minds of consumers, so that the product will always be remembered (Astini, 2016). This message and impression on consumers can help establish a brand image. Brand creation can be used as a foundation in constructing consumers' perceptions regarding the interest in a particular brand, thus, the brand image can be considered as something that sticks

in the consumers' minds when they remember a specific brand (Alamsyah & Hadiyanti, 2017; Maharani, 2020).

According to Fill & Mühlhäusler (2001), there are three kinds of green advertising. First, green commercial advertising is a commercial promotion focusing on a product or service with an eco-friendly claim. This ad aims to raise customers' awareness of environmental issues, highlighting the product's ecological benefits, such as the use of recycled materials, reduction of carbon emissions, and sustainable production practices. Fill and Mühlhäusler say that green commercial advertising is not only for promoting products or services but also for shaping customers' behavior to be aware of nature. The second one is greenwashing, which is different from green commercial ads. Greenwashing refers to companies' or organizations' practices of claiming that their products or services are eco-friendly. Nevertheless, the claim is used only to create a green or environmentally friendly image in the eyes of consumers, even though the company does not act as it advertises. Third, a green non-profit is a type of promotional social organization that is used to voice concerns about environmental issues without the intention to sell products that benefit the organization. Schmuck et al. (2018) state that since the end 1900s, greenwashing practices have declined but it remains prevalent in advertising. They found at least one aspect of greenwashing in three-fourths of ads, mostly appearing in vague or ambiguous claims.

In a previous study by Rahmadhani and Widodo (2023), a green brand image can be defined as the perception of a brand in customers' minds that combines commitment with concern for the environment. Their research found that green brand image has a positive and important impact on consumers' willingness to purchase the product. A powerful and credible brand image can increase consumers' trust, leading them to choose products that align with their environmental values. Moreover, this research also examines four variables (green brand image, green brand trust, green brand awareness, and green brand satisfaction), and green brand satisfaction has the most dominant influence on purchase intention. Although Rahmadhani & Widodo (2023) examine the positive impact of green brand image on purchase intention, the study does not discuss the negative impact of misleading greenwashing, which may be constructed in a brand intentionally making misleading green claims. However, they stated that brand image can significantly influence consumer perception of a product, thereby shaping the brand image that appears in consumers' minds when they recall a particular brand. Therefore, the current study bridges that gap by analyzing consumer responses through an ecolinguistics perspective.

Greenwashing in cosmetic industry

The greenwashing phenomenon was first discovered in 1986 by environmental activist Jay Westerveld. He revealed that greenwashing is a deceptive communication practice carried out by companies to sell products to their audiences (Diaz-Bustamante-Ventisca et al., 2023). Nemes et al. (2022) also argue that greenwashing gives consumers a false positive perception of an organization's environmental performance.

According to Graf et al. (2020), there are two ways of greenwashing. The first one is at the "product/service level," where textual opinions, either explicitly or

implicitly referring to the ecological benefits of a product or service, are used to provide misleading environmental claims. The second is at the “execution level,” in which advertising elements such as images or sounds create a product or service as if it is nature-friendly. Therefore, this ambiguous communication about the company is a strategy that creates confusion, distrust, and consumer disloyalty (Chen & Chang, 2012). Munir and Mohan (2022) further state that greenwashing is an indirect deception because consumers misinterpret the message, causing them to draw positive conclusions about the product.

Previous research on greenwashing by Kaur and Baranidharan (2024) states that the growth of greenwashing in the cosmetic industry can happen when the brand uses misleading eco-friendly claims, vague labels, and nature-inspired imagery to portray itself as more sustainable than it truly is. Although this strategy initially engages conscious consumers, it often leads to backlash and loss of trust when greenwashing practices are exposed. Kaur and Baranidharan’s research focuses on how companies use greenwashing strategies, but little attention has been given to consumer responses and the role of influencers in covering the issue. There is also a lack of ecolinguistics analysis on how brands can build a misleading perspective and how consumers react linguistically to green brand claims.

This research fills the gap by employing a critical ecolinguistics approach to examine consumer discourse surrounding Innisfree’s greenwashing case on Instagram. It explores how consumers express criticism and how the company uses influencers to mitigate the impact of greenwashing. This study provides new insight into the effects of greenwashing on brand perception in the beauty industry.

In the beauty industry, skincare products are vulnerable to this greenwashing strategy, as exemplified by Innisfree. Innisfree is a South Korean skincare brand founded by Amore Pacific in 2000. According to its official website, Innisfree provides natural beauty products from natural elements while maintaining sustainability. It offers a range of products, including skincare, makeup, body care, and hair care products. Since 2012, this brand has launched an ecological campaign, creating a green forest on Jeju Island and engaging in various environmental activities, including plastic recycling. However, in 2021, Innisfree was accused of engaging in greenwashing. According to BBC (2021), people criticized Innisfree for the slogan “Hello, I’m Paper Bottle” on green tea seed serum products after a customer discovered that the product’s packaging was made from paper-layered plastic. The company stated that the packaging uses 51.8% less plastic than the previous packaging (BBC, 2021). Consequently, customers began to doubt the company’s green credentials. This is an example of Zhang’s (2018) statement that 98% of products with an eco-friendly brand image have deceived customers by using green advertisements.

Method

This research is a critical ecolinguistics case study based on the ecolinguistics framework by Fill & Mühlhäusler (2001). A case study approach was chosen to analyze the context of green marketing communication in the Innisfree greenwashing scandal in depth. Creswell’s (2013) explanation that a case study explores real-life phenomena through multiple sources as evidence also became a consideration for choosing this approach.

This study also employed critical ecolinguistics, which investigates how language is used to construct environmental discourses and how these discourses either strengthen or challenge dominant ideologies regarding sustainability. By examining the linguistic choices in both Innisfree's green marketing messages and consumer reactions, this study unveiled how language was used to legitimize or contest environmental claims within the context of greenwashing.

The primary data in this research were collected from netizens' comments on Innisfree's official Instagram account, specifically those posted between April 6, 2021, and May 27, 2021. This timeframe was chosen to see consumer reactions following the publication of a BBC news report on April 9, 2021, which reported allegations of Innisfree engaging in greenwashing. This study employed the ecolinguistics framework to investigate data through the following steps: (1) examining Innisfree's Instagram posts that had been targeted by netizen criticism; (2) classifying the types of posts was also included to categorize netizens' comments based on three key themes: deception, loss of trust, and demand for transparency; (3) evaluating the alignment between Innisfree's environmental messaging and consumer responses; and (4) assessing the effect of greenwashing on sales performance. This study also utilized net profit data from 2013 to 2023, examining whether Innisfree's products remained popular, experienced moderate sales, or faced a decline in consumer demand.

Finding & Discussion

On April 5, 2021, Innisfree launched a Green Forest Campaign, which received numerous positive comments from netizens. However, there was a scandal surrounding Innisfree's use of plastic in their skincare paper wrappers. From the data, several effects have been found on the image and sales of Innisfree in their official Instagram account and e-commerce platform.

Consumers' reaction

In 2020, Innisfree launched a green tea beauty product featuring a "paper bottle" label. The appearance of this product is a form of Innisfree's initiative to reduce plastic packaging use (BBC, 2021). However, the BBC also reported that a South Korean customer uploaded a photo of an Innisfree product showing a plastic bottle wrapped in paper in a Facebook post. The customer also wrote a comment that Innisfree was practicing "misleading marketing." This caused various reactions from netizens, both from abroad and in Korea.

To analyze consumer reactions, the data were collected from comments on Innisfree's Instagram posts from April 6, 2021, to May 27, 2021, which were Innisfree's latest posts after the greenwashing news spread in the media. The data were grouped into three themes—deception, loss of trust, and demand for transparency—for in-depth analysis. The grouped data are provided in Table 1. Account names are redacted to ensure the privacy of the Instagram users and to avoid phishing.

Table 1. Categorization of customer reactions in Innisfree’s account from 6 April 2021 to 27 May 2021

Category	Account Name	Comments
Deception	@rog***	"Is that paper bottle scam really true?? Wasting even more material to give your customers the feeling they are making a good choice buying your products."
	@ale***	"The paper bottle is a plastic bottle. Shame on you!"
	@the***	"Dude are you serious with the plastic bottle disguised as a paper bottle?! Do better."
	@cie***	"This company was just caught for hiding plastic bottles under what they claimed was 100% paper and recyclable. DO NOT SUPPORT! Greenwashing!"
	@cha***	"Lyer! Stop using plastic"
	@the***	"Why are you lying about your product packaging?"
	@jam***	"WARNING ! This brand is greenwashing!!"
	@jam***	" ❌ avoid this brand! ❌ "
	Loss of Trust	@sha***
@est***		"Your products are not cruelty free and that's disappointing. I will not buy your products anymore."
@and***		"I leave the brand until you get the bunny certification cruelty free ❌🐰 stop torturing animals."
@ray***		"Your plastic will destroy Jeju island one day!"
@pau***		"Fckin liars"
Demand for Transparency	@jul***	"Stop greenwashing!!! You need to stop green marketing if you’re not serious about it"
	(Anonymous)	"I want to check whether an Innisfree product I bought is authentic or not. How to?"
	@xii***	"Hello, are you cruelty free?"
	@maa***	"Take care of the animals!! "
	@maa***	"This brand performs animal testing"

Category	Account Name	Comments
	@mou***	"Please stop animal testing! Begging you!"
	@kar***	"STOP ANIMAL TESTING 🐾 ❌ 🚫"
	@abi***	"Cool, now make it without torturing and murdering innocent animals ;) weak game bro"

According to Table 1, the majority of hateful comments from netizens reveal feelings of deception. Some of them said, *"The paper bottle is a plastic bottle. Shame on you!"*, *"Why are you lying about your product packaging?"*, *"Lyer! Stop using plastic"* indicating a strong moral disapproval from eco-conscious consumers. These netizen reactions indicated that the claim 'Hello, I'm paper bottle' on the packaging of Innisfree products was misleading, as it implies the bottle was entirely made of paper. However, in reality, the paper was only the outer coating of the plastic bottle. The use of the phrase 'paper bottle' showed a diction that gave an eco-friendly impression. The use of green themes, nature-related language, and the construction of the green forest campaign—Innisfree's vision and mission—further strengthened the green perception in the minds of netizens when they see the Innisfree brand. However, the product packaging that contained plastic left many people angry and feeling betrayed by the greenwashing practice, highlighting how the language in their marketing formed a deceptive green brand image. This proved that companies can manipulate the choice of words to create a misleading environmental narrative (Fill & Mühlhäusler, 2001).

The second discovery is that greenwashing caused a loss of consumers' trust. Netizens said that they no longer believe what Innisfree advertised about being environmentally friendly. The comment *"Believe me, if they are capable of doing such a thing with the "paper bottle" they are capable of lying and telling you they are #crueltyfree"* revealed that if Innisfree could lie about the 'paper bottle,' the company can also lie about being 'cruelty free.' This distrust led netizens to refrain from purchasing Innisfree products until the company obtains a genuine certificate confirming that it does not engage in animal abuse. All of this is because the positive, eco-friendly discourse built by Innisfree collapsed among brands and consumers. Once these green claims were proven inaccurate, netizens' beliefs about green preconceptions became skeptical and disappointed, as they assumed Innisfree was more concerned with marketing than with its environmental responsibility.

The third finding is the need for transparency within the company. Comments such as, *"Hello, are you cruelty-free?"*, *"Cool, now make it without torturing and killing innocent animals ;) lame game bro"*, *"Stop greenwashing!!! You need to stop green marketing if you are not serious"*, prove that netizens demanded Innisfree's specifications regarding clear product labels to avoid misleading messages, be more open about Cruelty Free certification, and a request to stop green marketing if Innisfree does not intend to protect the environment as advertised. Although Innisfree clarified that *PETA* (n.d.) stated that their products were not cruel to animals and were made from vegan ingredients, customers continued to comment that Innisfree products are not cruelty-free.

In conclusion, the greenwashing scandal created a negative image of Innisfree in the eyes of nature-loving audiences. Netizens speculated that if Innisfree could deceive its customers into believing that its packaging did not use plastic, then Innisfree products were also not vegan or animal-tested. Although Innisfree stated that its products had passed PETA's cruelty-free certification, netizens had lost trust and responded that Innisfree was not as environmentally friendly as advertised.

Sales performance data

Innisfree has established its brand image as a green product since its establishment in 2000. The data from Statista.com (2023) shows that sales of Innisfree products continued to increase from 2013 to 2016. However, sales of Innisfree products began to decline after 2016, decreased dramatically in 2020, and continued to decline in 2021.

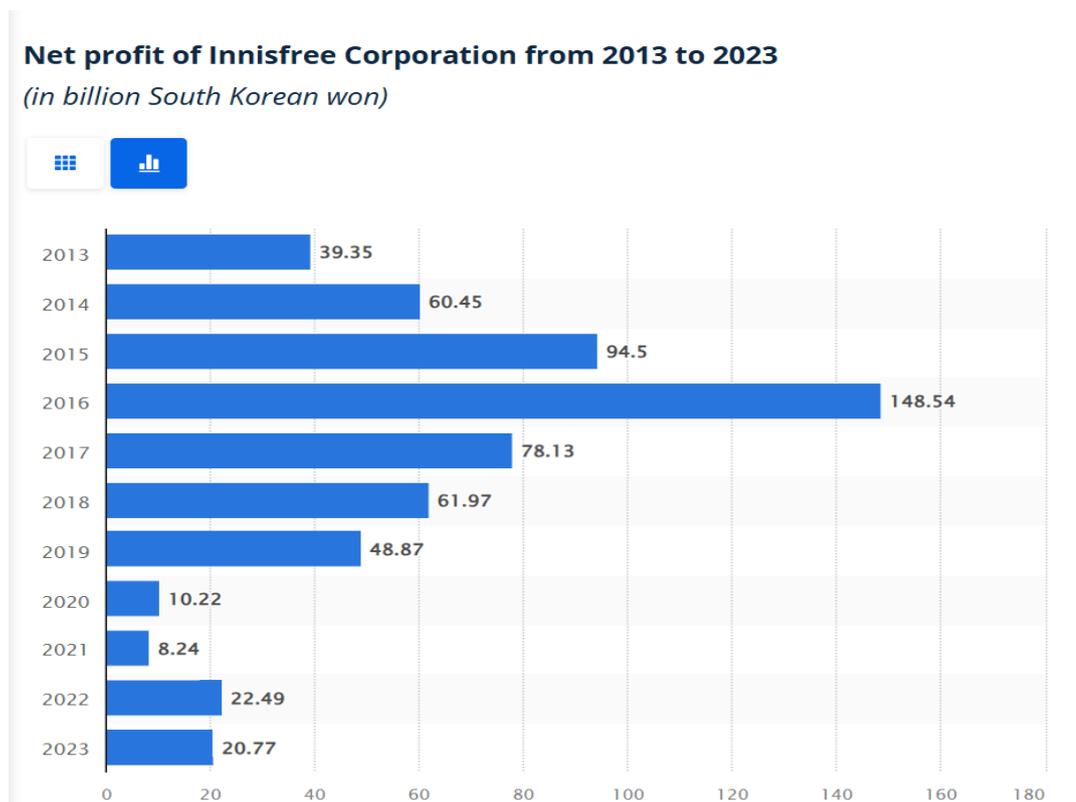


Figure 1. Net profit of Innisfree Corporation from 2013 to 2023

The data above shows Innisfree's net profit over the past 10 years. According to the data, Innisfree reported the highest net profit in 2016. However, in the following year, there was a significant decline in profit until it dropped in 2021. The first finding from the data is a sharp decline in net profit from 148.54 billion KRW (2016) to 8.24 billion KRW (2021). This decline coincided with the increasing media coverage of the Innisfree greenwashing scandal in 2021. Since 2012, Innisfree has created a Green Forest campaign and conducted environmental care activities, which increased its popularity until 2016. Then, in August 2020, Innisfree launched a green tea seed serum product with packaging that read "Hello, I'm Paper Bottle." However, the product was criticized by customers in 2021 after

the BBC reported on greenwashing news. This controversy prompted netizens to boycott Innisfree products as they felt deceived by the advertisements. This had a major impact on the consumers' trust, causing them to be more careful and even stop buying Innisfree products (as seen in Table 1).

Innisfree has sales centers in domestic (South Korea) and international markets (China, Southeast Asia, North America, and Europe). Despite reports by BBC, the negative response from Koreans, and Innisfree's misleading environmental claims, the domestic market still had loyal customers who like Innisfree products because of their quality. This can be proven from several comments on Innisfree posts. One of which, "제 파우치를 찍은 줄 알았어요 ㅋㅋㅋㅋㅋㅋㅋ 이니스프리 못잃어..♡" (I thought you took a picture of my pouch, I can't lose Innisfree) proves that some South Korean netizens still accept Innisfree products. Meanwhile, the international market, especially the Western market, which is more environmentally conscious, dominantly criticized Innisfree products. They also demanded the correct label from the company that is not misleading. This resulted in a significant decline in purchases in the international market. Judging from the reactions of netizens, there was a discussion on social media criticizing Innisfree, saying they would boycott or stop using Innisfree products. This affected repeat purchases because consumers preferred brands with more transparent claims. Although there was no clear boycott campaign, the decrease shown by the data could be due to consumers starting to abandon the brand.

Meanwhile, the data from 2022 shows a significant increase in sales. This was most likely due to the handling method employed by Innisfree, which was recruiting a brand ambassador, Wonyoung. The existence of brand ambassadors can improve or develop a product, whether new or not, to be better known in various circles and help customers make purchasing decisions (Ummat & Hayuningtias, 2022). The recruitment of a new brand ambassador, Jang Wonyoung, by Innisfree showed a positive and significant influence on consumer purchasing decisions of Innisfree products (Ghadani et al., 2022).

In conclusion, based on the sales statistics and related research presented above, the greenwashing scandal hurt Innisfree's sales over the past years. However, not all customers care about the environment. For instance, when Innisfree recruited an influencer, the customers' response became positive again, and they seemed to forget the previous greenwashing scandal. This suggests that customers prioritize Korean idols over environmental concerns.

The impact of greenwashed advertisement on Innisfree's brand image as a green company

The use of the words "Hello, I'm paper bottle" on the packaging gives the impression that the bottle is made entirely of paper. Then, the previous discourse built by Innisfree, such as the green forest campaign, environmental activities, and pure natural materials, strengthened the perception that the Innisfree company is truly responsible for the environment. According to Rahmadhani & Widodo (2023), green brand image has been effective in influencing purchasing intention. Likewise, Innisfree achieved its popularity as a green brand image until 2016.

However, the greenwashing scandal committed by Innisfree in 2021 damaged its brand image as a green product, as evidenced by the hateful comments on its official Instagram account and decreasing sales performance (as described in Table 1 and Figure 1). The greenwashing scandal on the serum product packaging, which was proven to be a form of greenwashing, reduced consumers' trust in the Innisfree brand image. As stated by Majláth (2017) and Raihana & Purwanegara (2023), greenwashing harms the green brand image. This caused customers to be more critical of the green brand image as their trust in products labeled eco-friendly was betrayed by the discovery of the greenwashing scandal.

Meanwhile, some Innisfree customers did not agree with or care about the green brand image. After Innisfree was reported to be conducting greenwashing, sales declined, and hateful comments flooded its Instagram. However, after Innisfree used Wonyoung as a brand ambassador, hateful comments against greenwashing disappeared and only focused on Wonyoung. Besides, sales in 2022 also increased compared to 2021. As Ummat & Hayuningtias (2022) stated, the presence of influencers as brand ambassadors enhances customers' purchase intentions. This suggests that customers were more interested in Korean idols than in the green brand image promoted by Innisfree and that influencers could increase customers' purchase intention.

Conclusion

This study analyzed how Innisfree constructs a green brand image through language, imagery, and framing in its green marketing efforts. The analysis reveals that although the brand employs ecolinguistic strategies to bolster its sustainability claims, a greenwashing scandal can erode consumer trust. In this case, greenwashing is a form of inconsistent messaging by Innisfree as a green brand in the cosmetic industry. Therefore, this case can lower consumers' trust in the products. Then, the use of influencers can cover the company's greenwashing scandal and rebuild customer purchase intention.

Theoretically, this research expands the study of ecolinguistics by showing how linguistic choices contribute to green brand image strategies in commercial contexts. This study provides a basis for further analysis of similar strategies in other industries. Practically, this finding highlights the importance of aligning the sustainability message with tangible actions. Misleading perceptions may invoke legal risks and reputational consequences and also weaken consumers' trust in sustainability efforts.

Future research could explore consumer responses to greenwashing in diverse cultural contexts, assess the effectiveness of regulatory measures, and examine the evolving role of ecolinguistics in digital marketing. Addressing these areas will help refine sustainability communication strategies and foster more responsible marketing practices. In addition, researching psychological factors that can influence consumer skepticism of green brand claims can provide deeper insights into trust-building strategies. Furthermore, longitudinal studies of the greenwashing effect on brand loyalty would be valuable in understanding long-term consumer behavior.

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