

## **Is Green really the New Black?**

### **Greenwashing**

Have you ever received reusable items from attending school open houses, events, or buying groceries?

From water bottles to recyclable bags, the popularity of these items as freebies can be attributed to the zero-waste movement in Singapore that has been gaining momentum recently. Similarly, many businesses hop on the bandwagon to sell zero-waste kits and other green items to milk the most out of the movement.

But do you ever stop to think if “eco-products” were actually sourced ethically or produced in an environmentally-sustainable manner?

This ties in to greenwashing, which refers to misleading claims of a product or company practices being eco-friendly when they are not (Teng, 2017). When businesses deceptively promote themselves as environmentally-conscious, they misinform consumers who attempt to adopt a more environmentally sustainable lifestyle. Simultaneously, they may even generate more waste which is counter-productive to the very goals of the zero-waste movement. The problem with this is that businesses are using zero-waste to boost their reputation and siphon off the rising green demand.

### **Why is Greenwashing bad?**

#### **1. Excessive packaging used**

First introduced to zero-waste because of the no-straw movement, I searched up on where to buy metal straws as a substitute. I found that many Singaporeans frequent online platforms like Shopee, where “eco-products” sold are cheaper than sustainable local businesses, like The Green Collective at Funan.

However, mass manufacturers on Shopee are simply capitalising on the green movement. The Shopee guidelines advise sellers to ship out their products in excessive packaging (even for non-fragile items), which contradicts the intent of consumers trying to reduce their waste. As they are not required to state their packaging methods, this misleads consumers into thinking that buying these “eco-products” help the environment.

A quick search on Shopee shows examples of consumers being greenwashed.

quality seems not bad, came exactly as pictured in the listing



Image: Screenshot on Shopee of a customer's metal straw individually wrapped in plastic

received in bubble wrap. good packaging. good price too...



Image: Screenshot on Shopee of a customer's metal straw individually wrapped in bubble wrap

The customer reviews show that greenwashing online has regrettably become normalised, with consumers oblivious that their purchases are not as “green” as they thought it would be.

## **2. Distorts the meaning of being zero-waste**

There is a hierarchy of importance when it comes to 'zero-waste', with the highest priority for consumers being "Reduce", followed by "Reuse" (Zero Waste International Alliance, 2018). But with consumerism ingrained in us, we think that we need to possess certain things in order to begin a zero-waste lifestyle (Toussaint, 2019). We forget that drinking from the cup is an alternative to plastic straws because of the abundance of "green products" advertised as a necessity to go green.

Furthermore, we are often unaware that offsetting the resources used to produce our green products requires our commitment to constantly reuse them (Ong, 2018). When companies greenwash, they distract the meaning of zero-waste away from a "cut-back" mindset.

If companies wanted to contribute to sustainable lifestyles, they would educate consumers instead of profiting off consumers' misinformation.

### **How to combat Greenwashing**

#### **1. Support companies who are ethical with their production**

If you are thinking of getting eco-products, try avoiding mass-manufacturers on platforms like Taobao, Shopee, or shops that are not committed to being environmentally-friendly. Instead, support companies who are passionate about doing what is best for the environment. Local business Bamboo Straw Girl is transparent about her source of bamboo, she re-uses cardboard boxes to ship large orders, and packs her products in upcycled batik fabric (which is made into a pouch). Doing research ensures that your purchases are from a business whose values align with yours.

#### **2. Identify sustainable options**

From cleaning supplies to personal care products, you can be a more conscious consumer by looking out for environmental certifications on products. For example, the Singapore Green Labelling Scheme (SGLS) certification is given to products which have met certain environmental and health prerequisites. Such labels can better help you to decide what products to buy to minimise damage to the Earth.



An icon of the SGLS certification. Image: SGLS website



The SGLS certification seen on a local dishwashing liquid brand. Image: SGLS product directory

Although these labels are a benchmark, be mindful to double check that they are legitimate and not self-proclaimed.

### 3. Change your mindset about what is truly zero-waste

The zero-waste journey starts by differentiating between your 'needs' and 'wants', to practise restraint in purchasing. Alternatively, thrift shopping or upcycling are the next best thing to do. Instead of giving in to consumerism, we should think of ways to reuse items around us and be more thrifty.

Business-owners should also consider sustainable options when it comes to packaging, instead of following the movement blindly without actual contribution towards helping the environment.

Ultimately, zero-waste is about being more conscious, whether as a consumer or corporation. Consumer demand is capable of changing some ways that businesses operate, and the cumulative impact of this should not be understated. The green wave has the potential to make a positive change, and we should not let it be sabotaged by selfishness and ignorance. Together, we can make a difference.

[796 words]

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