

Media Release

DATE: 8 MARCH 2023 9:00AM (AEST)

Research investigates “greenwashing” advertising on social media

Researchers from the ARC Centre of Excellence for Automated Decision-Making and Society (ADM+S) are uncovering vague and misleading green advertising on social media, with the help of the Australian consumers who are being targeted.

So far researchers have observed that many advertisers, especially those in the clothing and footwear, personal care, and food and food packaging industries, market themselves with green claims. Many of these claims are vague and unsubstantiated, and have the potential to mislead consumers.

Professor Christine Parker, Chief Investigator at the ADM+S Centre, says the practice of making misleading claims about a product's environmental sustainability, known as “greenwashing”, is likely to be on the rise. Increased consumer demand for more sustainable products, increased understanding of the need for business to take action on the climate crisis, and the need to shift to a circular economy are likely to be driving green claims.

“Some advertisers are using vague wording alongside green imagery to give an impression of environmental action - but with no clear information and substantiation of exactly what the company is doing to achieve its environmental and climate promises or how the product is contributing to a circular economy,” says Professor Parker.

In a [recent audit](#), the Australian Competition and Consumer Commission (ACCC) found that more than half of organisations advertising online made concerning claims about their environmental or sustainability practices.

The Consumer Policy and Research Centre (CPRC) found [similar results](#) in a 24-hour sweep of online advertising conducted last year. The CPRC also found that many consumers believe some authority is checking green claims before they are made - which is not in fact the case.

“Conscientious consumers may well be targeted with a whole string of green ads that make them feel like business is doing the right thing and we are on a good environmental path”

“But this might be a completely misleading impression. Many of these claims may not be substantiated.”

In collaboration with the Consumer Policy Research Centre (CPRC), the ADM+S Centre is investigating whether Facebook users are seeing ads that are misleading, harmful or unlawful.

This research is conducted through the Centre’s [Australian Ad Observatory](#), a project that relies on citizen scientists to share the ads that they see on Facebook.

“This approach is important because it gives us a way to see how Facebook advertising is targeted to individual users - a practice that is normally hidden from public view and regulatory scrutiny,” says Professor Parker.

The recent ACCC report investigated green claims made in publicly visible online advertising, while research by the ADM+S Centre will help uncover advertising usually hidden from public scrutiny.

Professor Parker says “it is possible that advertisers could engage in less responsible advertising practices on social media where they are less likely to face regulatory scrutiny.”

Researchers are investigating how frequently consumers are targeted with green advertising, and how misleading these claims are. Findings from this research will be used to inform regulators and policy makers about addressing unsubstantiated green claims.

Australians are invited to join this research project by visiting [The Australian Ad Observatory](#) website.

The ARC Centre of Excellence for Automated Decision-Making and Society (ADM+S) is funded by the Australian Government through the Australian Research Council.

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ADDITIONAL INFORMATION:

Professor Christine Parker

Prof Christine Parker is a Chief Investigator at the University of Melbourne node of the ARC Centre of Excellence for Automated Decision-Making & Society (ADM+S), and a Professor at Melbourne Law School.

Professor Parker has written, researched and consulted widely on how and why business comply with legal, social and environmental responsibilities and what difference regulatory



enforcement makes. Her work has been published in books and academic journals and used in policy making and enforcement strategy.

The ADM+S Centre

The ARC Centre of Excellence for Automated Decision-Making and Society (ADM+S) is a cross-disciplinary, national research centre, which aims to create the knowledge and strategies necessary for responsible, ethical, and inclusive automated decision-making (ADM). Funded by the Australian Research Council from 2020 to 2027, ADM+S is hosted at RMIT in Melbourne, Australia, with nodes located at eight other Australian universities, and partners around the world. The Centre brings together leading researchers in the humanities, social and technological sciences in an international industry, research and civil society network.

The Centre aims to contribute to the mitigation of the social and economic risks in the development and implementation of ADM, and to improve outcomes and efficiencies in four key focus areas where automation is already well advanced: news and media, transport and mobility, health care, and social services.