Greenwashing Narratives on Social Media: A Cross-Cultural Comparative Study of Videos on TikTok and Douyin

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Abstract

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This study investigates how greenwashing narratives are constructed on short video platforms within Chinese-language and English-language contexts, focusing on cross-platform differences between Douyin and TikTok. A mixed-method approach was employed, combining quantitative content analysis of 147 high-engagement videos with qualitative framing analysis of selected call-to-action cases. Videos were analyzed based on creator type, industry context, framing functions, rhetorical and visual styles, and cultural orientation, with user engagement metrics used as outcome variables. The results show that TikTok content often features personal narratives and expressive tones, with critiques that target fast fashion brands and emphasize moral judgement. By contrast, Douyin videos are more likely to address systemic issues in ESG-related sectors, using neutral, informational framing and referring to regulatory actors. The study demonstrates how users across different platforms engage with greenwashing in culturally and contextually distinct ways, reflecting the interaction between narrative conventions, industry visibility, and platform-specific discourse environments. By integrating framing theory with cross-cultural analysis, the study offers an empirical lens on how sustainability discourse is reshaped by user participation in algorithmic media spaces.

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1. Introduction

Short video social platforms such as TikTok and Douyin are reshaping the paradigms of public engagement with environmental issues. Unlike traditional media and early text-based social media, these platforms enable content creators to construct environmental narratives through dynamic audiovisual language, thus expanding new forms of user participation in environmental discourse (Wang & Li, 2024).

As leading short video platforms, TikTok and Douyin are primarily characterized by user-generated content (UGC) (Valdovinos Kaye et al., 2021), with more than 2.3 billion monthly active users (Kemp, 2025). They serve distinct user bases—TikTok targets international audiences, while Douyin serves the Chinese domestic market (Valdovinos Kaye et al., 2021).

While short video platforms create new opportunities for environmental communication, they also provide space for the strategic manipulation of green narratives (Vaughan & Johns, 2021). Greenwashing is one such practice, referring to the act of misleading consumers by exaggerating or misrepresenting a company's environmental practices or performance through positive but unsubstantiated claims (TerraChoice, 2010).

In this study, greenwashing narratives refer to short video content tagged with a hashtag like #greenwashing or its Chinese equivalent that is created and circulated by content creators. This includes not only videos that critique corporate environmental claims, such as revealing inconsistencies between a company's sustainability messaging and its actual environmental performance, or comparing promotional content with real production practices, but also those that more broadly and diversely challenge green marketing practices or expose environmentally harmful behaviors.

Although existing research on greenwashing has extensively examined its definitions, universality, and impacts on consumer trust, most studies have focused on text-dominant platforms such as Twitter, Facebook and Instagram (e.g., Lyon & Montgomery, 2013; Blazkova et al., 2023; Topal et al., 2020; Sailer et al., 2021). Some scholars have explored visual strategies in environmental communication (e.g., Jones et al., 2022), but systematic research on how greenwashing

narratives—typically initiated by corporations—are reinterpreted by content creators through audiovisual elements remains limited.

Additionally, although there is growing evidence that cultural and regulatory environments influence public perceptions and responses to greenwashing, research in developing and emerging markets remains significantly underexplored compared to that in Western and developed contexts (Natasya et al., 2023). Similarly, cross-cultural studies examining greenwashing narratives in the Chinese context—particularly in comparison with English-language environments—remain limited.

In response to these gaps, this study examines greenwashing narratives across TikTok and Douyin from a cross-cultural perspective. By analyzing user-generated, high-engagement videos related to the hashtag #greenwashing or its Chinese equivalent, this study compares how narrative strategies differ across the two platforms and examines how these differences correspond to broader cultural value orientations. In this context, narrative strategies refer to the ways in which content creators construct meaning along three dimensions: (1) framing functions, (2) rhetorical and visual styles, and (3) cultural orientations.

2. Background

With the energy crisis and increasingly serious environmental problems, green consumption has been given more and more attention by companies and consumers (Zhang et al., 2018). Over the past decade, stakeholders like investors, consumers, governments, and corporate customers have been increasing the pressure on companies to disclose information about their environmental performance (Kim & Lyon, 2015; Marquis et al., 2016) and for environmental-friendly products (Guo et al., 2014).

According to PwC's 2024 Voice of the Consumer Survey, which collected the perspectives of more than 20,000 consumers from across 31 countries and territories, more than 80% of consumers expressed a willingness to pay for sustainably produced

or sourced goods. Among them, some are willing to pay an average premium of 9.7% for products that meet specific environmental standards.

Comparable findings are reported in European research, indicating that consumers perceive their purchasing choices as a means of contributing to climate change mitigation (European Commission, 2018). Similarly, a study conducted by BBC World News and Synovate found that over 61% of American consumers had bought environmentally friendly products (Hanson, 2013). In China, around 66% of respondents stated that they were willing to pay more for sustainable goods (Deloitte, 2023). For instance, organic foods, which in general are more expensive than traditional food products (Essoussi & Zahaf, 2009).

Since the work of Delmas and Burbano (2011), the green market has experienced significant growth, with expansion observed across consumers, capital markets, products, services, and firms. However, this growth has also been accompanied by a rise in greenwashing practices (Majláth, 2017). TerraChoice (2010) reported that 95% of products claiming to be green in Canada and the USA committed at least one of the "sins of greenwashing".

Stakeholders and society in general demand greater transparency in disclosing information about the environmental impact of companies' activities. To meet these expectations, communication must be dynamic (Antunes et al., 2015). The advent of Web 2.0 has introduced new social media tools, enabling stakeholders to engage in more interactive and participatory ways of sharing and exchanging information online (Chakravorti, 2010).

TikTok and Douyin, owned by the Chinese tech giant ByteDance, have emerged as influential short video platforms shaping global digital communication (Valdovinos Kaye et al., 2021). According to DataReportal, TikTok has 1.59 billion monthly active users worldwide in 2025, while Douyin has 766 million (Kemp, 2025). On both TikTok and Douyin, users can record, publish, and view short videos, as well as interact with other users (Omar & Dequan, 2020). Their AI algorithms enable users to see topics of interest, with creative video content being the primary social object (Li et al., 2019).

Although they share similar technological infrastructures and interface designs, they operate independently under fundamentally different sociopolitical and regulatory environments. TikTok functions within a relatively open global information ecosystem, whereas Douyin is shaped by a state-led governance model tailored to Chinese audiences (Valdovinos Kaye et al., 2021).

These contextual differences are also reflected in content creation patterns. For instance, Finjan (2024) found that TikTok creators tend to use expressive strategies such as sarcasm, comedy, and personal commentary to raise awareness of environmental issues. In contrast, Sun et al. (2020), through a large-scale content-based analysis, found that Douyin users have a simpler and more static lifestyle than TikTok.

These background factors provide the foundation for a closer examination of how greenwashing narratives are constructed and perceived on short video platforms such as TikTok and Douyin.

3. Research and Questions

Building on the background outlined above, this study aims to critically examine the characteristics and cross-cultural differences in greenwashing narratives constructed by content creators within the English-language context of TikTok and the Chinese-language context of Douyin. It explores how creator type, industry context, and narrative strategy reflect distinct cultural values and correlate with patterns of user engagement on each platform. Furthermore, special attention is given to call-to-action narratives that critique corporate greenwashing, as they strongly embody divergent ideological foundations within their respective cultural environments.

Adopting a mixed-methods design, this study integrated quantitative content analysis of metadata, content, and user engagement indicators from 100 most-liked TikTok videos and 47 Douyin videos, selected manually based on relevance to the hashtag #greenwashing or its Chinese equivalent. This was complemented by a

framing-based qualitative analysis of three selected call-to-action videos that critique greenwashing on each platform. This dual approach enables a cross-cultural exploration of how narrative strategy shaped by cultural contexts affect user interaction with greenwashing content.

Research questions:

(1) How do creator type, industry context, and narrative strategy in greenwashing narratives correlate with user engagement on TikTok and Douyin?

(2) How are call-to-action critiques of corporate greenwashing framed and expressed differently by content creators on TikTok and Douyin?

These research questions are addressed through a two-part design: RQ1 is explored through quantitative content analysis of video-related data, while RQ2 is examined through framing-based qualitative analysis of selected call-to-action videos. To situate this study within existing scholarly discourse and identify key conceptual foundations, the following section reviews relevant literature on greenwashing and cross-cultural perspectives.

4. Literature Review

This literature review was developed through a combination of keyword-based searches, semantic tools, and citation tracking. Searches were conducted in Google Scholar and Scopus using terms such as greenwashing, short video platforms, content analysis, framing theory, and cross-cultural comparison. The AI tool Elicit was also used to explore additional thematically relevant studies. Reference lists from authoritative greenwashing works, including Lyon and Maxwell (2011), Delmas and Burbano (2011), and Parguel et al. (2015), were reviewed to identify widely cited contributions. Drawing on this selection, the review examines how greenwashing is distributed across industries and geographies, as well as its manifestation and acceptance on social media platforms, and how it is interpreted and contested in

different sociocultural contexts. These strands together provide the conceptual basis for analyzing how greenwashing narratives are constructed and engaged with in these contexts.

4.1. Greenwashing

4.1.1. The emergence and growth of greenwashing

The term greenwashing was first coined in 1986, by an environmentalist Jay Westervelt. He published an essay criticizing hospitality industry practices to promote towel reuse but made little effort to recycle (Cuenllas, 2014).

According to the advertising agency Ogilvy and Mather, over the past few decades, greenwashing has surged alongside the rise of green markets (Nyilasy et al., 2014), reaching epidemic proportions (Hsu, 2011). As highlighted in a recent report from RepRisk (2023), there was a 35% increase in greenwashing incidents globally in 2023 compared to 2022. Among them, financial services and banking industries experienced a 70% surge in greenwashing incidents.

Beyond its growing visibility, greenwashing has also raised concern for its damaging effects on consumer trust (Nyilasy et al., 2014).

4.1.2. The impact of greenwashing on consumer trust

Greenwashing has a profound and multi-layered impact on consumer trust (Durmuş Şenyapar, 2024). As consumers struggle to distinguish genuine environmental claims, trust issues have emerged (Nyilasy et al., 2014), fueling growing skepticism toward environmentalism (Chen et al., 2013).

A growing body of research highlights how greenwashing undermines not only consumer trust but also purchasing behavior and brand perception (Guerreiro & Pacheco, 2021). For example, Guerreiro and Pacheco (2021) find greenwashing negatively influenced green purchasing intentions indirectly through green trust and word-of-mouth. Similarly, empirical research in Brazil shows that when consumers perceive greenwashing, feelings of risk and confusion become central to their decision-making process, often resulting in rejection of the product due to distrust and

disillusionment. Once greenwashing is identified, consumers report decreased satisfaction and loyalty, and may continue purchasing only with diminished expectations and little or no belief in brand credibility (Braga Junior et al., 2019).

At the societal level, greenwashing may undermine the consumer confidence in green products and services, which harms the green transition and organizations making real investments in substantive social and environmental improvements (European Commission, 2023; Gatti et al., 2019). In addition, Pizzetti et al. (2021) emphasize the importance of attribution, showing that corporate greenwashing (direct greenwashing) causes more consumer resentment than supplier's greenwashing (indirect greenwashing).

These findings underscore that greenwashing not only damages brand credibility but also erodes the foundations of consumer trust and marketplace accountability. Compared to other corporate risks, greenwashing poses a greater threat to market order and business ethics by undermining investor trust and distorting environmental accountability (Furlow, 2010).

These trust-related consequences are not confined to isolated incidents, but emerge across a wide range of sectors and business models.

4.1.3. The prevalence of greenwashing in the industry

A large-scale review by TerraChoice (2010) found that among over 1,000 self-declared green products, all but one exhibited some form of greenwashing, indicating that the problem is pervasive across product categories. Numerous empirical studies have documented how greenwashing manifests across a wide range of industries, revealing its sectoral diversity and the varied strategies companies employ to appear environmentally responsible (e.g., Adamkiewicz et al., 2022; Tikkha et al., 2024; Chen, 2024; Yu et al., 2020).

Consumer-facing industries

Greenwashing is particularly pervasive in consumer-facing industries such as fashion, hospitality, and food and beverage, where environmental narratives are often

embedded in product design, branding, and advertising (e.g., Adamkiewicz et al., 2022; Majeed & Kim, 2023; Tikkha et al., 2024).

In the fashion industry, greenwashing has become a widespread strategy in response to mounting pressure for sustainability. Brands often claim to be more sustainable while making only negligible improvements to a small portion of their collections, downcycling materials instead of pursuing fiber-to-fiber recycling, or promoting take-back programs that encourage guilt-free consumption (Adamkiewicz et al., 2022). Moreover, the industry's growing reliance on eco-labels and certification schemes has drawn criticism. Many of these schemes are acting as sustainability decoys for brands, lacking transparency, accountability, and independence, which have enabled large-scale greenwashing (Changing Markets Foundation, 2022). According to recent findings, some top brands have been found to make false environmental claims in up to 96% of cases (S.R.L. Eco-Age, 2021).

The hospitality industry is one of the largest industries globally, contributing about 10.4% to the global gross domestic product. With the increasing awareness of environmental protection, around 79% of hotel consumers express a preference for eco-friendly accommodations (Tark & Oh, 2021). However, implementing substantive changes to reduce carbon footprints often entails high operational and labor costs (Gupta et al., 2019b), leading to a gap between marketing and reality. As a result, some customers view hotels' environmental messaging as misleading promotional tactics rather than genuine sustainability efforts (Chen et al., 2018). Labor perspectives echo this skepticism: in a study conducted by UNITEHERE Local, the largest hospitality workers' union in North America, 75% of employees reported that supposed green initiatives were in fact cost-cutting measures aimed at reducing housekeeping expenses, rather than bona fide environmental actions (Tufts & Milne, 2014).

In the food and beverage industry, greenwashing is especially prevalent in marketing practices involving product labeling, packaging, and health-related claims. Companies frequently use vague terms such as "natural," "organic," or "farm fresh" without third-party certification, creating misleading impressions of environmental

and health benefits (Grunert et al., 2014; Montero-Navarro et al., 2021). Common greenwashing practices in this sector include the use of green-colored packaging to imply eco-friendliness, exaggerated claims about local sourcing or recyclability, and deceptive health labels such as "sugar-free" or "high fiber," which may conceal the use of environmentally harmful synthetic substitutes (Schmuck et al., 2018; Rokka & Uusitalo, 2008). Major global brands—including Coca-Cola, McDonald's, and Nestlé—have faced criticism or legal action for promoting environmental initiatives that lacked substance, such as recyclable packaging without proper recycling infrastructure or misleading statements about ingredient sourcing (Tikkha et al., 2024). These practices not only undermine consumer trust but also obscure the industry's significant contribution to resource depletion and carbon emissions.

High-emission industries

In sectors characterized by high carbon emissions, such as energy, aviation, and materials, greenwashing often takes the form of strategic misrepresentation rather than aesthetic framing (e.g., Chen, 2024; Yu et al., 2020).

In the energy sector, greenwashing is particularly prevalent and complex, especially with the rise of carbon offsetting programs. According to a report released by Greenpeace in November 2023, global energy companies, including Shell, BP, and Total Energy, have engaged in carbon offsetting through the purchase of forestry carbon sinks and other mechanisms. These practices are considered forms of greenwashing (Chen, 2024).

Similarly, in the aviation sector, environmentalists have sued major airline company KLM for promoting so-called carbon-neutral flights through forestry offset schemes, arguing that such advertising misleadingly downplays the aviation industry's contribution to climate change. These strategies, often framed as climate solutions, obscure the actual environmental impact of high-emission industries and exemplify the symbolic decoupling between ESG disclosure and real performance (Chen, 2024).

Furthermore, a sector-wide assessment found that materials companies exhibit the highest relative risk of greenwashing, followed by new energy and utilities (Yu et al.,

2020).

In summary, these examples underscore that greenwashing is not confined to any single industry or region, but represents a pervasive and systemic issue spanning diverse sectors, business models, and promotional strategies.

4.1.4. The geographical prevalence of greenwashing

Beyond industry distribution, the comprehensive analysis conducted by RepRisk—drawing on data from over 100,000 public and private entities across 165 countries (excluding corporate self-disclosures)—found that 18% of the companies, and 31% of public companies, engaged in greenwashing since 2018 have also participated in "social washing." The report also showed that 54% of companies in Asia, Europe and North America greenwashed their records on greenhouse gas emissions, global pollution and other climate change-related issues. This finding underscores the global reach of greenwashing across geographical regions.

Geographical and institutional contexts further shape the manifestation and intensity of greenwashing. A large-scale cross-national study of 1,731 firms across 34 countries revealed that companies operating in countries with stronger environmental regulations and higher levels of state ownership are significantly less likely to engage in greenwashing, due to greater coercive pressures and stronger environmental accountability mechanisms. In contrast, firms in weaker regulatory environments—often in developing markets—face fewer constraints and are therefore more prone to greenwashing practices, unless counterbalanced by external audits or third-party verification (Flankova et al., 2021).

Aji and Sutikno (2015), in an empirical study conducted in Indonesia, confirmed that greenwashing increases consumer confusion, skepticism, and perceived risk—three psychological constructs that together undermine green trust. These effects may lead to decreased green purchase intention and even brand switching. The study highlights that greenwashing has evolved from a marginal ethical concern into a mainstream risk to green market integrity, particularly in developing markets where regulatory frameworks and consumer protections are weaker.

4.1.5. Greenwashing on Social Media

As social media has become a pivotal arena for public engagement on social issues, research has turned to how user-generated content (UGC) shapes and challenges greenwashing narratives. Including blogs, online petitions, wiki pages, Twitter, and Facebook, these technological and social tools are redefining interactions between corporations and civil society across multiple domains (Fieseler et al., 2010).

Lyon and Montgomery (2013) argue that greenwashing is more likely to occur in firms with poor environmental performance, limited external scrutiny, or strong reputational incentives to appear green without undertaking substantive improvements. Such firms often engage in selective disclosure—emphasizing positive outcomes while omitting negative information—to construct a favorable image under conditions of constrained transparency. However, social media reduce the cost of monitoring corporate behavior, enabling consumers and activists to more readily expose and mobilize opposition to communications perceived as greenwashing.

On text-based platforms such as Twitter, Blazkova et al. (2023) mapped the landscape of greenwashing debates and found that discussions tend to be concentrated around a limited number of themes, sectors, companies, and stakeholders. Their findings also suggest that only companies in certain high-profile industries—particularly the energy sector—face a significant risk of being accused of greenwashing online, while firms in other sectors largely operate without such public scrutiny.

In addition, regarding user responses to greenwashing on social media, Topal et al. (2020) analyzed online consumer engagement on Volkswagen's Facebook brand pages before and after the 2015 diesel emissions scandal across four countries: France, Germany, Turkey, and the United Kingdom. The study revealed significant national differences in consumer reactions, suggesting that engagement with greenwashing on social media is shaped not only by perceived corporate deception but also by cultural context, national sentiment, and brand loyalty.

In contrast, on visual-first platforms like Instagram, Sailer et al. (2021) identified

a wide array of greenwashing and bluewashing strategies employed by sustainable fashion brands during the Black Friday period. While these practices may provide short-term competitive advantages even for genuinely sustainable small and medium-sized enterprises, they risk legitimizing similar behaviors by unsustainable brands. Notably, truly sustainability-conscious consumers tended not to approve of these marketing strategies. The study also revealed that posts featuring green visual symbols—such as leaves, the Earth, and minimalist design—tended to receive more likes and positive emotional reactions than posts lacking such imagery, even when the content clearly qualified as greenwashing.

Together, these studies demonstrate that while social media enhance greenwashing visibility, they also offer new rhetorical tools for sustaining deceptive narratives (e.g., Lyon and Montgomery, 2013; Blazkova et al., 2023; Sailer et al., 2022).

4.2. Cultural Perspectives

Cultural norms and institutional enforcement mechanisms also shape how greenwashing is perceived and regulated across different markets. Panjaitan & Sutapa (2010) observe that consumers in developed economies tend to be more environmentally conscious and are generally more willing to pay a premium for sustainable products. In contrast, in emerging markets, greenwashing is more likely to go undetected or unpunished due to weaker regulatory oversight and lower public awareness (Huang et al., 2020). These differences point to varying levels of green literacy and institutional accountability across regions.

In addition to consumer attitudes, cultural contexts also shape how individuals express criticism and mobilize engagement in response to perceived corporate misconduct, including environmental deception. While not focused specifically on greenwashing, studies on Chinese digital activism (e.g., Treré & Yu, 2021; Yu, 2021) show that platforms like Douyin have become strategic venues for consumer video activism, where ordinary users leverage personal stories, visual evidence, and emotional appeals to mobilize public attention and institutional response. Rather than

relying on overt confrontation, these expressions emphasize credibility and relatability, often embedded in everyday media practices.

By contrast, TikTok videos on fast fashion often adopt sarcasm, satire, and personal commentary to critique unsustainable practices and engage audiences through humor and relatability (Finjan, 2024). These culturally embedded expressive styles—ranging from emotional sincerity to ironic detachment—help shape how short video creators across different regions frame their responses to environmental controversies, including greenwashing.

Summary

In summary, existing literature has extensively examined greenwashing across industries (e.g., TerraChoice, 2010; Adamkiewicz et al., 2022; Chen, 2024), regions (Flankova et al., 2021; Aji & Sutikno, 2015), and its impact on consumer trust and behavior (Pizzetti et al., 2021; Braga Junior et al., 2019).

Researchers have also explored how greenwashing narratives are constructed on text-based social media platforms such as Twitter and Facebook, focusing on corporate messaging strategies, selective disclosure, and public backlash (Lyon & Montgomery, 2013; Blazkova et al., 2023; Topal et al., 2020). On visual-based platforms like Instagram, studies highlight how aesthetic strategies contribute to blurred boundaries between green marketing and greenwashing (Sailer et al., 2021).

However, little is known about how greenwashing is framed and interpreted on short video platforms such as TikTok and Douyin, particularly through user-generated content and in culturally distinct social media environments. This study addresses that gap by comparing greenwashing narratives on these two platforms, offering new insights into digital sustainability discourse, platform affordances, and the role of cultural norms in shaping user engagement.

5. Theory

This study adopts an interdisciplinary theoretical framework that integrates concepts from greenwashing, framing theory, and cultural dimensions. This framework offers analytical tools to investigate how narrative strategies differ across platforms. Specifically, it facilitates the analysis of how framing functions, rhetorical and visual styles, and cultural orientations embedded in user-generated videos associated with the hashtag #greenwashing or its Chinese equivalent reflect broader cultural values and platform-specific logics.

5.1. Greenwashing Theories

5.1.1. Definition of Greenwashing

Greenwashing serves as a foundational and core concept in this study, which is not merely deceptive behavior but a strategic discursive practice with identifiable characteristics (Williams, 2024).

The term "greenwashing" did not gain popularity until ten years after it was first coined by Jay Westerveld, when Greer and Bruno (1996) brought it into the mainstream. However, there is still no single universal definition of the phenomenon, probably due to its interdisciplinary nature. Table 1 shows the most popular definitions (Zioło et al., 2024).

Table 1. Definitions of Greenwashing

Author	Definition
Webster's New Millennium Dictionary	"Practice of promoting environmentally friendly programs to deflect attention from an organization's environmentally unfriendly or less savory activities."
Concise Oxford English Dictionary	"Disinformation disseminated by an organization so as to present an environmentally responsible public image; a public image of environmental responsibility promulgated by or for an organization, etc., but perceived as being unfounded or intentionally misleading."
Greenpeace	"The act of misleading consumers regarding the environmental practices of a company or the environmental benefits of a product or service", "a public relation tactic used to make a company or product appear

Author	Definition
	environmentally friendly, without meaningfully reducing its environmental impact."
TerraChoice (2010)	"The act of misleading consumers regarding the environmental practices of a company or the environmental performance and positive communication about environmental performance."
Delmas and Burbano (2011)	"Poor environmental performance and positive communication about environmental performance."
Parguel et al. (2015)	The act of misleading consumers regarding the environmental practices of a company or the environmental benefits of a product or service."

Source: Zioło et al., 2024

Lyon and Maxwell (2011) define greenwashing as the selective disclosure of positive information about a company's environmental or social performance, without full disclosure of negative information on these dimensions, so as to create an overly positive corporate image. This aligns with Simion's (2024) framing of greenwashing as eco-fraud, which involves deliberate misrepresentation to influence public perception. Greenwashing is therefore a deliberate action (Mitchell & Ramey, 2011) and an intentional fraud (Lyon & Maxwell, 2011; Nyilasy et al., 2014).

5.1.2. Types of Greenwashing

Building on a systematic review of greenwashing typologies, de Freitas Netto et al. (2020) distinguished four types of greenwashing in their study, based on the categorization proposed by Delmas and Burbano (2011), that is, firm-level executional, firm-level claim, product-level executional, and product-level claim. Most researchers' attention so far has been paid to product/service-level claim greenwashing.

- Claim greenwashing, where misleading is achieved through textual elements—such as vague language, unverifiable labels, or scientific jargon.

- Executional greenwashing, a concept first proposed by Parguel et al. (2015), where deception is conveyed through visual or symbolic cues—such as nature imagery, soothing green color palettes, or calming music.

These classifications are not employed in this study to directly assess the greenwashing strategies of corporations, but rather to understand how such strategies are identified, referenced, or challenged by content creators on TikTok and Douyin. Specifically, the distinction between claim-based and executional greenwashing provides a lens through which to analyze the narrative focus of critiques—whether creators target misleading textual claims (e.g., vague sustainability language or unverifiable certifications) or symbolic visual cues (e.g., nature imagery or green color palettes).

5.2. Framing Theory

5.2.1. Entman's framing theory

To examine the narrative features and framing patterns of greenwashing content created by users on TikTok and Douyin, this study incorporates Entman's (1993) framing theory, which conceptualizes framing as the selection and emphasis of certain aspects of perceived reality to promote a particular problem definition, causal interpretation, moral evaluation, or treatment recommendation. These four interrelated functions provide a systematic framework for analyzing how creators construct meaning and mobilize critique in short-form video content.

- Problem Definition: Diagnosing problems, or defining the issues associated with a topic.
- Causal Interpretation: Diagnosing causes, or identifying what or who are the main forces driving the problem.
- Moral Evaluation: Making moral evaluations, which may include asserting whether the causal agents or the consequences of an issue are good or bad.
- Treatment Recommendation: Recommending treatments, which describe potential 'solutions' to the identified problems.

These four framing functions form the analytical basis of this study, providing a structured perspective to examine user-generated greenwashing narratives. They help identify how creators construct narrative frames in short videos to define issues, express evaluations, and mobilize responses.

While the framework was originally developed for analyzing media news discourse (Linström & Marais, 2012), its structure aligns well with the characteristics of short video narratives. Therefore, this study adapts and extends it to the analysis of user-generated greenwashing videos within short video platforms.

5.2.2. Rodriguez and Dimitrova's Visual Framing Model

While Entman's (1993) model offers a foundational structure for identifying narrative framing through textual cues, it does not fully capture the multimodal nature of short video content. To address this limitation, this study refers to the four-level visual framing model proposed by Rodriguez and Dimitrova (2011).

- Denotative: What is explicitly depicted in the image or video (e.g., objects, people, actions).
- Stylistic-Semiotic: How visual techniques—such as editing, camera movement, lighting, or filters—shape the viewer's perception.
- Connotative: The symbolic or culturally coded meanings embedded in the imagery.
- Ideological: The broader social, political, or cultural values conveyed through the visual composition.

These levels offer a systematic framework for analyzing how visual elements contribute to the construction and emphasis of meaning. This study focuses specifically on the stylistic-semiotic and connotative levels, which are particularly suited to interpreting how users employ audiovisual strategies to shape environmental narratives.

Combined with Entman's framing model, the visual framing framework enables a multimodal analysis of how meaning is constructed and visually expressed in user-generated greenwashing narratives across the distinct media environments of TikTok and Douyin.

5.3. Cultural Theories

Culture in this thesis is understood as a shared system of values, norms, and communicative practices that shape how individuals interpret and express meaning in mediated contexts (Hall, 1976; Hofstede, 2001). Rather than treating culture as a fixed national trait, the study focuses on how cultural orientations manifest in rhetorical styles, expressive norms, and framing strategies on different media platforms.

Situated in a cross-cultural analysis of greenwashing narratives on TikTok (English-language environment) and Douyin (Chinese-language environment), the research draws on cultural theory to examine how users critique environmental messages within distinct socio-communicative frameworks. These platforms are viewed as culturally shaped environments, influenced by broader value systems such as individualism versus collectivism and low-context versus high-context communication. These dimensions are used as interpretive tools to analyze recurring stylistic and narrative differences across the two platforms. The following sections outline the two main cultural models that inform this analysis.

5.3.1. Hofstede's Cultural Dimensions

This study does not seek to establish a causal relationship between cultural values and narrative strategies. Instead, it adopts an interpretive approach drawing on Geert Hofstede's (2001) cultural dimensions theory—specifically, the individualism–collectivism dimension—to explore how user-generated critiques of greenwashing may reflect broader cultural orientations embedded in different societies.

According to Hofstede (2001), individualistic societies stress achievement and individual rights, with a person's self-image in this category being defined as "I." In

contrast, collectivist societies place greater importance on the goals and well-being of the group, with a person's self-image in this category being more similar to a "We." Those from collectivist cultures tend to emphasize relationships and loyalty more than those from individualistic cultures, while communication tends to be more direct in individualistic societies.

These cultural orientations are supported by comparative data from The Culture Factor (formerly Hofstede Insights), a well-established website that provides cross-national data on cultural dimensions (The Culture Factor, n.d.). It shows that the United Kingdom scores 76 and the United States scores 60 on individualism, indicating a highly individualistic culture. China, by contrast, scores only 43, reflecting a strongly collectivist orientation. These quantitative differences offer additional grounding for the communicative contrasts examined in this study.

5.3.2. Hall's Model of Low-context and High-context Culture

To further understand how cultural values influence communicative styles, this study also draws on Edward Hall's model of high-context and low-context cultures (Hall, 1976; Hall & Hall, 1990). According to Hall, "the cultures of the world can be compared on a scale from high to low context." In this model, context refers to the information that surrounds a communicative event, shaping how messages are interpreted beyond their explicit content.

In high-context cultures, such as China, "most of the information is already in the person". Communication relies heavily on indirect verbal cues and non-verbal implications, and listeners are expected to infer meaning based on familiarity, relationships, and shared background knowledge. By contrast, low-context cultures like the United States favor explicit and direct communication, requiring little reliance on shared context. Each interaction is treated as self-contained, often accompanied by detailed background information (Hall, 1976; Hall & Hall, 1990).

This distinction not only complements Hofstede's individualism–collectivism dimension but also offers a cultural lens for interpreting variation in how greenwashing critiques are framed and expressed on TikTok and Douyin.

Building on both Hofstede's and Hall's insights, this study incorporates their cultural dimensions into the analytical framework to better interpret how narrative strategies and communicative styles reflect broader cultural orientations across platforms.

Summary

This theoretical framework enables a multi-layered, cross-cultural analysis of greenwashing narratives on TikTok and Douyin by integrating concepts from greenwashing discourse, framing theory, and cultural communication. Greenwashing theory provides the conceptual foundation for understanding how content creators engage with, reinterpret, and challenge misleading environmental claims through user-generated video narratives. Framing theory, including both textual and visual approaches, supports the systematic identification of meaning-making patterns by outlining how greenwashing issues are defined, attributed, morally evaluated, resolved, and visually constructed in short-form video narratives. Cultural dimensions theory offers an interpretive lens for analyzing stylistic and narrative differences across the two platforms.

Together, these frameworks inform the construction of coding variables used in the quantitative content analysis, and guide the qualitative analysis of call-to-action narratives by revealing how multimodal framing strategies reflect cultural and stylistic patterns. This integrated approach allows the study to assess how greenwashing-related narratives are shaped and expressed within the distinct communicative contexts of TikTok and Douyin.

6. Method and material

This study adopted a mixed-methods approach to examine the dynamic relationship between the narrative characteristics of greenwashing videos created by content creators on TikTok (English context) and Douyin (Chinese context) and patterns of user engagement, as well as the cultural differences these narratives reflect.

The methodological integration adopted was grounded in the recognition that user engagement with greenwashing narratives on short video platforms is shaped by the interaction between communicative styles, platform dynamics, and cultural contexts. Accordingly, the mixed-methods design employed here is not simply additive, but analytically complementary, allowing the research to achieve both empirical breadth and interpretive depth.

To ensure contextual relevance, the analytical framework builds on but adapts Entman's four framing functions and Rodriguez and Dimitrova's visual framing model, while also integrating cultural interpretation perspectives from Hofstede and Hall. In this study, these concepts are operationalized into a context-specific coding scheme that captures how TikTok and Douyin creators construct greenwashing narratives through distinct framing functions, visual style, and culturally embedded expressions.

Specifically, quantitative content analysis is combined with framing-based qualitative analysis to capture the complexity, multimodality, and cultural embeddedness of the research topic.

The quantitative content analysis focuses on comparing creator type, industry context, framing functions, rhetorical and visual styles, and cultural orientations, and examines how these elements are associated with user engagement metrics such as likes, comments, favorites, and shares.

The qualitative analysis builds on the same theoretical dimensions as the quantitative phase but shifts to an interpretive examination of how content creators on TikTok and Douyin construct call-to-action critiques. It seeks to identify recurring narrative patterns, expressive styles, and framing strategies shaped by the communicative norms of each platform.

6.1. Data Collection

This study collected user-generated video content from TikTok and Douyin for content analysis, focusing on high-engagement posts under the hashtag #greenwashing.

The sampling time frame spans from January 2022 to April 2025, ensuring that videos had sufficient time to accumulate user engagement while remaining contextually relevant. Notably, RepRisk (2023) reported a 35% increase in global media coverage of greenwashing incidents in 2023 compared to 2022, highlighting the importance and timeliness of this study's dataset.

A dataset of TikTok and Douyin videos related to the hashtag #greenwashing was collected between 10 and 11 May 2025. The original sampling plan aimed to include 100 user-generated videos from each platform, with English-language content from TikTok and Chinese-language content from Douyin. However, the final dataset consisted of 100 TikTok and 47 Douyin videos due to content limitations. Selection was based on relevance to the hashtag #greenwashing or its Chinese equivalent, as well as indicators of user engagement. Commercial promotions and unrelated content were excluded. A purposive sampling strategy was employed to ensure thematic focus and allow meaningful exploration of platform-level patterns.

For TikTok, 100 videos were successfully collected. These videos were identified by searching for "#greenwashing" within the TikTok mobile application. Selection prioritized the "Top" tab, which displays highly engaged content ranked by like count. When the number of eligible videos under this tab was insufficient, additional content was sourced from the "Videos" tab. To minimize algorithmic inconsistencies caused by repeated searches, the collection process was carried out through continuous scrolling within a single session.

On Douyin, however, the volume of greenwashing-related content was significantly lower. Despite extensive efforts using both hashtag search and manual browsing of the entire hashtag library, only 25 videos carrying the corresponding Chinese hashtag were found. To accommodate the content habits of Chinese Douyin users, who do not always rely on hashtags, and to supplement the limited sample, 21 user-generated videos with titles containing the term "greenwashing" were also included. Additionally, one further video was included based on its clear thematic relevance, even though it did not contain either the hashtag or related keywords. This approach resulted in a total sample of 47 Douyin videos for analysis.

To ensure technical consistency and avoid discrepancies between platform versions, the latest available iOS versions of TikTok (international version 39.7.0) and Douyin (mainland China version 34.2.0) were used during data collection. For TikTok, the researcher account was newly created on March 17, 2025 and was intentionally kept minimally active to reduce algorithmic personalization. Although limited prior usage during the testing phase may have influenced search results, efforts were made to minimize its impact. For Douyin, the account used for data collection was originally registered on March 22, 2018. However, since the sample nearly exhausts all available greenwashing-related videos on the platform, any potential influence from prior algorithmic exposure is considered negligible.

All data were obtained from publicly accessible user-generated content through manual search and download procedures. Tools such as Apify assisted in extracting video files and associated metadata, including like count, comment count, favorites, shares, and publication date.

While this study does not aim to reverse-engineer the algorithms behind TikTok and Douyin, the manually selected, most-liked videos related to the hashtag #greenwashing are treated as empirical outputs shaped by each platform's recommendation mechanisms and user interaction dynamics. As digital platforms are not neutral spaces (Chen et al., 2021), but are shaped by algorithmic and institutional logics, high-engagement content serves as a proxy for discursive prominence. This sampling strategy allows the study to examine how mainstream users interpret and engage with greenwashing narratives across distinct cultural and technological environments.

6.2. Material

This study analyzed a cross-platform sample of user-generated videos related to greenwashing and focused on how narrative strategies differed across TikTok and Douyin.

At the time of data collection, the hashtag #greenwashing had accumulated about 16 thousand posts and 217.9 million views on TikTok (Countik, 2025), whereas its

Chinese equivalent on Douyin had only around 63 posts, garnering roughly 2.82 million views. Despite this significant difference in volume, these hashtags represented the primary labels for greenwashing-related content on each platform and attracted considerably more attention than other related tags.

Notably, due to cultural and linguistic differences, the term "greenwashing" in Chinese was sometimes misunderstood or conflated with unrelated meanings—such as green hair dyeing or jade jewelry. As a result, unrelated content was often mixed into the Douyin hashtag feed, complicating direct comparisons of cross-platform profiles. To ensure analytical precision, the dataset was systematically screened and content not aligned with the research subject was excluded.

Building on this dataset, the analysis considered multiple dimensions. In addition to the video content itself—including audiovisual components and rhetorical expression—the study also examined metadata such as creator type, accompanying textual description, publication time, and user engagement indicators, including the number of likes, comments, favorites, and shares.

The collected videos were produced by a range of content creators, including individual users, environmental organizations, and media outlets. The industry sectors referenced included fast fashion, personal care, and ESG-related finance. These videos encompassed diverse framing strategies, rhetorical and visual styles.

To guide the development of the coding scheme, the study drew on established theories of media framing, visual framing, and cultural communication. These perspectives informed three analytical dimensions: framing functions, rhetorical and visual styles, and cultural orientations. The table below summarizes how these theoretical concepts were translated into operational variables.

Table 2. Operationalization of Analytical Dimensions

Analytical Dimension	Theoretical Basis	Operational Focus
Framing Functions	Entman (1993)	Issue Emphasis, Blame Assignment, Ethical Judgement,

Analytical Dimension	Theoretical Basis	Operational Focus
		Call-to-action
Rhetorical & Visual Styles	Rodriguez & Dimitrova (2011)	Visual Form, Expressive Tone
Cultural Orientations	Hofstede (2001); Hall (1976)	Value Orientation, Critique Style

Detailed operational definitions for all coding variables are provided in Appendix A.

6.3. Theoretical Operationalization

The analytical framework was developed through a deductive approach grounded in established theories of media framing, visual analysis, and cultural communication. It reflects key concepts from Entman's (1993) four framing functions, Rodriguez and Dimitrova's (2011) visual framing model, and Hofstede's and Hall's theories of cultural orientation, which informed the construction of the coding dimensions.

To systematically analyze these narratives, the framework integrated four elements: creator type, industry context, narrative strategy, and user engagement. The narrative strategy is further organized into three core analytical dimensions: framing functions, rhetorical and visual styles, and cultural orientations. Several of these dimensions were operationalized into specific variables, each measured using a binary coding scheme indicating presence ("yes") or absence ("no") of the relevant feature. This allowed for multiple applicable codes per video within a given dimension. Detailed descriptions and coding logic are provided in the following subsections.

6.3.1. Creator Type and Industry Context

Each video was coded based on the content creator, such as individual, environmental organization, or journalist/media outlet. It is also categorized by the primary industry being criticized or referenced, including areas like fast fashion, food and beverage, beauty and personal care, energy/aviation, or ESG-related finance. This

classification helps identify patterns across different sectors and makes it possible to examine how greenwashing narratives differ depending on the creator's type and the industry context.

6.3.2. Framing Functions

This dimension was adapted from Entman's (1993) media framing model and was redesigned into specific variables to capture four main types of framing functions:

- Issue Emphasis, which includes pretending the product is eco-friendly, using marketing to appear green, faking green operations, or shifting environmental responsibility onto consumers.
- Blame Assignment, which involves attributing responsibility to specific companies or brands, entire industries, consumers, or government bodies.
- Ethical Judgement, which focuses on exposing misleading intentions, saying green but doing dirty, or prioritizing profit over environmental concerns.
- Call-to-action, which refers to audience interaction (such as commenting or following), encouraging behavioral changes or engaging in collective action.

Each variable was measured using multiple binary variables, which would allow for multiple applicable codes per video and supported cross-platform contrasts in frequency and distribution patterns.

6.3.3. Rhetorical and Visual Styles

Based on Rodriguez and Dimitrova's (2011) visual framing theory, this dimension captures the audiovisual and rhetorical techniques used to shape perception. Two variables are applied:

- Visual Form: Includes talking-head formats, comparison with pictures or text, and situational interpretation or interview, live broadcast.
- Expressive Tone: Captures the dominant tone as humor or satire, shows strong emotions, explains things logically, or just states the facts.

These variables measured by binary variables enabled the analysis of how stylistic choices influenced the emotional resonance and communicative effectiveness of greenwashing critiques.

6.3.4. Cultural Orientations

To explore the relationship between cultural norms and narrative style, the framework draws on Hofstede's individualism–collectivism dimension and Hall's theory of high- and low-context cultures. This dimension was operationalized through two categorical variables:

- Value Orientation: Whether the narrative appeals to personal vs. collective values.
- Critique Style: Whether criticism is expressed in a direct or indirect manner.

These variables help interpret how cultural values are embedded in the structure and tone of environmental messaging across platforms.

6.3.5. User Engagement

Finally, four user engagement indicators—likes, comments, favorites, and shares—are included to evaluate how audiences respond to greenwashing content. These metrics serve as proxies for the visibility, resonance, and communicative reach of each narrative.

Together, this framework provides the conceptual and operational basis for both the quantitative and qualitative phases of the analysis, enabling a cross-platform and cross-cultural analysis of how greenwashing narratives are constructed, framed, and received in short video environments.

6.4. Analytical Strategy

This section outlines how the analytical framework was applied to investigate the construction of greenwashing narratives by content creators on TikTok and Douyin,

as well as how these narratives reflect platform-specific communication styles and underlying cultural values. The analysis follows a sequential and complementary approach: the first phase provides an overview of platform-level narrative patterns, while the second offers a more detailed exploration of how creators employ audiovisual storytelling to critique greenwashing in culturally distinct ways.

6.4.1. Quantitative Content Analysis

The first phase of analysis examines general patterns in greenwashing-related videos on TikTok and Douyin. This phase addresses RQ1, which investigates how creator type, industry context, and narrative strategy relate to user engagement metrics.

The sample for this phase includes 100 TikTok videos and 47 Douyin videos. This resulted in a total dataset of 147 user-generated videos for platform-level contrast. Drawing on the theoretical framework established earlier, the analysis operationalizes three main analytical dimensions:

(1) Framing functions (Entman, 1993)
(2) Rhetorical and visual styles (Rodriguez & Dimitrova, 2011)
(3) Cultural orientations (Hofstede, 2001; Hall, 1976)

The framing functions and rhetorical and visual styles dimensions were operationalized into specific variables and measured by several binary variables. For example, the variable "Targets specific companies or brands" was coded as 1 if the video explicitly or implicitly assigned responsibility to a specific company for greenwashing practices. "Prioritizes profit over everything" was coded as 0 if the video did not emphasize that the company is profit-driven or mention how much profit it has made. In terms of expressive tone, "uses humor or satire" was coded as 1 when the speaker used sarcastic language or facial expressions; if not, it was coded as 0.

The cultural orientation dimension was measured using two categorical variables. One distinguished between collective and individual value orientations, based on

whether the video emphasized shared societal responsibility or personal feelings. The other identified critique style as either direct or indirect, depending on whether the criticism was openly stated or implied.

All variables were defined in a structured codebook developed through a pilot phase and applied consistently across the full sample. Statistical comparisons between platforms were conducted to assess differences in the distribution of each variable.

6.4.2. Framing-based Qualitative Analysis

To address RQ2, the study explores how call-to-action videos construct critiques of greenwashing through multimodal narrative strategies. This phase adopted a framing-based qualitative approach, examining how meaning is constructed through the orchestration of visual, verbal, and auditory elements in culturally situated ways.

Three "call-to-action" videos from each platform were selected through purposive sampling based on the following criteria:

(1) Alignment with the study's focus on call-to-action narratives
(2) Higher levels of user interaction as an indicator of engagement
(3) Variety in creators, topics, and ways of expression

Specifically, we first exclude all videos that do not contain any call-to-action strategies, in line with the study's focus on how such narratives are constructed. Next, the remaining videos are ranked by the number of likes, with priority given to those with higher engagement. From this pool, we purposively selected cases that reflect diversity in creator types, industry contexts, and other narrative dimensions, in order to capture a broad range of perspectives and expressive styles.

The qualitative analysis draws on the same theoretical dimensions used in the quantitative phase but shifts to an interpretive, multimodal perspective focused on how meaning is enacted through visual, verbal, and performative elements. This approach is informed by framing theory (Entman, 1993) and visual framing theory (Rodriguez & Dimitrova, 2011), and is used to analyze the multimodal and dynamic nature of audiovisual content.

6.4.3. Reliability, Validity, and Trustworthiness

In the quantitative phase, reliability was approached through the design of a structured codebook with clearly defined variable categories. However, as the coding was completed solely by the researcher, inter-coder reliability could not be formally assessed. While repeated rounds of coding were conducted to ensure internal consistency, this process does not eliminate the limitations associated with single-coder analysis. The absence of independent coding introduces potential bias and limits the ability to verify the stability of coding decisions.

Validity was addressed by grounding the operational definitions of variables in established theoretical frameworks, including media framing, visual rhetoric, and cultural communication theories. Nevertheless, the unbalanced sample size between platforms (100 TikTok and 47 Douyin videos) reflects differences in content availability rather than selective sampling. While platform-level contrasts are reported to highlight observed trends, these should be interpreted not as generalizable comparisons but as indicative patterns grounded in the available dataset.

In the qualitative phase, trustworthiness was supported through reflexive engagement with the data. Interpretations were grounded in repeated viewing of the videos, and analytic memos were used to document the development of emerging themes. Still, all interpretations were made by a single researcher, and the absence of peer debriefing or participant validation introduces the risk of interpretive bias. The researcher's theoretical lens and cultural background may have shaped the reading of certain narratives, especially in culturally embedded cues on Douyin.

Across both components, all coding procedures, selection criteria, and analytic decisions were carefully documented to support transparency and replicability. While this study made efforts to uphold methodological rigor, the limitations outlined above should be taken into account when evaluating the strength and scope of the findings.

6.5. Data Ethics Statement

This study adheres to responsible data ethics principles, ensuring transparency, legality, and the protection of user privacy. Data collection was restricted to publicly accessible TikTok and Douyin videos, and all analyzed metrics were obtained from information available in the public domain. No private or sensitive user information, such as usernames, profile images, or direct identifiers, was collected or recorded.

All user-generated content was anonymized during the research process to prevent personal identification. The research design clearly specifies the sample selection criteria, data handling procedures, and analytical methods to ensure that the findings accurately represent user behaviors and platform-level dynamics without compromising individual privacy.

7. Analysis

This chapter presents the empirical results derived from the mixed-method approach outlined in the previous section. By combining quantitative content analysis with qualitative framing analysis, it examines how greenwashing narratives are constructed and received across TikTok and Douyin, highlighting both cross-platform contrasts and culturally embedded patterns.

7.1. Quantitative Findings

This section presents the findings of the quantitative analysis of greenwashing-related content on TikTok and Douyin. Drawing on the coding framework outlined in the method section, the analysis explores descriptive statistics, platform-level contrasts, and regression-based evaluations of factors associated with user engagement. The results offer insights into how creator types, industry contexts, and narrative strategies are reflected in content patterns across the two platforms.

The analysis draws on a dataset of 147 user-generated videos, including 100 TikTok videos, which were selected strictly based on the hashtag search, and 47 Douyin videos, for which the selection scope was appropriately expanded due to limited hashtag usage.

7.1.1. Descriptive Statistics

7.1.1.1. Creator Type

It is evident that individual users (87.1%) constitute the primary group of greenwashing content creators on both short video platforms. However, their dominance is stronger on TikTok, where they account for 92% of the sample, 15.4% points higher than on Douyin. In contrast, journalists or media outlets are significantly more active on Douyin, comprising 12.8% of creators, compared to just 4% on TikTok. This contrast not only suggests that individual users in the English-language context may be more inclined to engage publicly with environmental issues, but also implies a divergence in the types of voices shaping greenwashing narratives across platforms: more personal and informal on TikTok, and relatively more institutional or journalistic on Douyin.

Interestingly, despite the global relevance of environmental issues, environmental organizations (3.4%) contributed far fewer videos than expected. This limited presence may indicate a broader underrepresentation of institutional voices in short video-based environmental discussion. Additionally, 8.5% of creators on Douyin were categorized as 'other'. This group, mainly consisting of business owners or corporate account managers with distinct Chinese characteristics, represents a creator type less common on TikTok.

Table 3. Distribution of Creator Type

Creator Type	TikTok (N)	TikTok (%)	Douyin (N)	Douyin (%)	Total (N)	Total (%)
Individual	92	92.0	36	76.6	128	87.1
Environmental Organization	4	4.0	1	2.1	5	3.4
Journalist/Media Outlet	4	4.0	6	12.8	10	6.8
Other	0	0.0	4	8.5	4	2.7
Total	100	100.0	47	100.0	147	100.0

7.1.1.2. Industry context

In terms of industry distribution, TikTok users tend to care more about sustainability issues that are directly related to everyday consumer behavior and brand responsibility, with greenwashing narratives largely concentrated in consumer-oriented industries. For instance, the fast fashion sector alone accounts for almost half (43%) of all TikTok videos. Although the proportion on Douyin is also considerable, reaching nearly one-fifth (19.1%), most cases reference European brands or events and make little mention of domestic Chinese companies. This pattern underscores the dominant role of fast fashion (35.4%) in shaping greenwashing discourse across both platforms.

In contrast, greenwashing-related content on Douyin is more commonly associated with structurally embedded and policy-relevant sectors, such as ESG-related finance and investment (21.3%) and energy or aviation (8.5%). These distributions reflect a stronger emphasis on macro-level environmental governance and institutional accountability among Douyin users.

On the other hand, content related to the beauty and personal care industry appears exclusively on TikTok (13%), while ESG-related finance appears only on Douyin (21.3%). This distinction highlights a clear contrast in topic visibility and issue prioritization between the two platforms, reflecting their underlying differences in content ecology and audience orientation.

Table 4. Distribution of Industry Context

Industry Context	TikTok (N)	TikTok (%)	Douyin (N)	Douyin (%)	Total (N)	Total (%)
Fast Fashion / Apparel	43	43.0	9	19.1	52	35.4
Food & Beverage	9	9.0	3	6.4	12	8.2
Beauty & Personal Care	13	13.0	0	0.0	13	8.8
Energy / Aviation	5	5.0	4	8.5	9	6.1
Fast-Moving	7	7.0	3	6.4	10	6.8

Industry Context	TikTok (N)	TikTok (%)	Douyin (N)	Douyin (%)	Total (N)	Total (%)
Consumer Goods Technology / Electric Vehicles	2	2.0	2	4.3	4	2.7
ESG-related Finance / Investment	0	0.0	10	21.3	10	6.8
Other / Multiple	21	21.0	16	34.0	37	25.2
Total	100	100.0	47	100.0	147	100.0

7.1.1.3. Publish Time

The temporal distribution of greenwashing-related video content from 2022 to 2024 broadly aligns with the upward trend highlighted in the RepRisk (2023) report. This pattern is partially reflected in the dataset: the proportion of videos increased from 22.4% in 2022 to 27.2% in 2023, before peaking at 34% in 2024.

On Douyin, the share of greenwashing-related content rose more sharply in 2024, accounting for 46.8% of its total sample. This suggests a delayed but growing public awareness and sensitivity toward environmental accountability within the Chinese digital environment.

By contrast, the distribution on TikTok remained relatively stable across the three years, with a gradual increase rather than a sudden surge. This consistency indicates that discussions around greenwashing had already become a recognizable content theme on TikTok by 2022, and continued to gain moderate traction over time.

Table 5. Distribution of Publish Time

Year	TikTok (N)	TikTok (%)	Douyin (N)	Douyin (%)	Total (N)	Total (%)
2022	24	24.0	9	19.1	33	22.4
2023	28	28.0	12	25.5	40	27.2
2024	28	28.0	22	46.8	50	34.0
2025	20	20.0	4	8.5	24	16.3
Total	100	100.0	47	100.0	147	100.0

7.1.1.4. User Engagement

To provide a comprehensive understanding of audience engagement, this study compared four key engagement indicators across the two platforms: likes, comments, favorites, and shares. Given the extreme variance and highly skewed distribution of these indicators, median values were reported to better capture the typical level of user interaction.

The results reveal stark contrasts between platforms: the median engagement metrics on TikTok are dozens to more than a hundred times higher than those on Douyin across all four indicators. This significant difference suggests that TikTok users exhibit significantly higher levels of interaction with greenwashing-related content compared to users on Douyin.

Table 6. Median Engagement Indicators

Indicator	TikTok (Median)	Douyin (Median)
Likes	1183	10
Comments	31	1
Favorites	64	2
Shares	30	1

In line with Brodie et al. (2013), who conceptualize user engagement as a multidimensional process encompassing behavioral, emotional, and cognitive components, this study constructed a composite engagement index that reflects the specific affordances of short video social media platforms.

Different weights were assigned to each engagement type: likes were weighted as 1 (representing low-effort feedback), comments and shares as 2 (indicating deeper behavioral engagement), and favorites as 1.5 (suggesting delayed or sustained interest). Prior to calculation, all indicators were winsorized at the 1st and 99th percentiles to mitigate the effects of extreme values, and then standardized using z-scores. The weighted sum of these standardized scores was used to construct the final composite user engagement score.

The composite engagement score mitigates the influence of outliers in individual metrics and provides a standardized index for comparing interaction levels across platforms. The results show a clear difference: the median engagement score on TikTok is 3.32, while that of Douyin is -5.97. Since the score is standardized across the full sample, positive values indicate above-average engagement and negative values reflect below-average engagement. These results suggest that, on average, TikTok videos receive substantially more user attention and interaction compared to Douyin videos, while Douyin's greenwashing narratives do not receive as much social attention.

Table 7. Median Use Engagement Score

Platform	User Engagement Score (Median)
TikTok	3.3220
Douyin	-5.9675

7.1.2. Comparative Analysis

7.1.2.1. Cross-Platform Differences in Thematic Framing

The analysis of framing functions draws on the four variables introduced in the method section: issue emphasis, blame assignment, ethical judgement, and call-to-action. These categories, adapted from Entman's (1993) conceptualization of framing, were used to code the presence or absence of specific communicative elements within each video, capturing how different aspects of greenwashing are framed across platforms.

Focusing first on issue emphasis, measured using four binary variables, the analysis revealed that a majority of videos (75.5%) highlighted greenwashing through marketing. This emphasis was particularly pronounced on Douyin, where 87.2% of videos focused on such aspects, compared to 70% on TikTok. In contrast, TikTok users were significantly more likely to focus on the product itself, with 39% of videos referencing this strategy, compared to only 12.8% on Douyin. These patterns

suggested that TikTok creators tended to focus on the material aspects of greenwashing, while Douyin users placed greater attention on promotional strategies.

Table 8. Issue Emphasis on TikTok and Douyin

Variable	TikTok (1 = Yes) N	TikTok (1 = Yes) %	Douyin (1 = Yes) N	Douyin (1 = Yes) %	Total (1 = Yes) N	Total (1 = Yes) %
product looks eco-friendly but isn't	39	39.0	6	12.8	45	30.6
ads or marketing pretend to be green	70	70.0	41	87.2	111	75.5
operations claim to be green but aren't	38	38.0	25	53.2	63	42.9
environmental responsibility is pushed onto consumers	4	4.0	4	8.5	8	5.4

Blame assignment was also examined using four binary variables. As expected, the most common target of blame was companies or brands, appearing in 60.5% of the sample videos. However, a notable divergence emerged in the attribution of responsibility to governments: 31.9% of Douyin videos assigned blame to governmental bodies, compared to just 6% on TikTok. Here, notably, "government" refers not only to Chinese authorities but also to regulatory agencies mentioned in international contexts. This difference suggests that Douyin users were more likely to refer to institutional actors, including both domestic and international entities, when framing greenwashing. In contrast, TikTok users rarely situated responsibility at the state or regulatory level.

Table 9. Blame Assignment on TikTok and Douyin

Variable	TikTok (1 = Yes) N	TikTok (1 = Yes) %	Douyin (1 = Yes) N	Douyin (1 = Yes) %	Total (1 = Yes) N	Total (1 = Yes) %

Targets specific companies or brands	63	63.0	26	55.3	89	60.5
says the whole industry is greenwashing	21	21.0	13	27.7	34	23.1
says consumers are part of the problem	3	3.0	1	2.1	4	2.7
blames the government for poor regulation	6	6.0	15	31.9	21	14.3

Differences in ethical judgements were assessed using three binary variables. Most of these strategies appeared with comparable frequency across the two platforms. The most common approach, adopted in 85.7% of videos, involved moral criticism of companies for misleading consumers. Although the overall usage was similar, Douyin videos showed a slightly stronger focus on corporate deception.

Table 10. Ethical judgement on TikTok and Douyin

Variable	TikTok (1 = Yes) N	TikTok (1 = Yes) %	Douyin (1 = Yes) N	Douyin (1 = Yes) %	Total (1 = Yes) N	Total (1 = Yes) %
misleads consumers on purpose	82	82.0	44	93.6	126	85.7
pretends to be green while causing harm	48	48.0	20	42.6	68	46.3
prioritizes profit over everything	18	18.0	8	17.0	26	17.7

Interestingly, calls for collective action were rare on both platforms, appearing in only 2% of videos and almost entirely absent from the discourse. In contrast, notable differences emerged in other types of calls to action. Douyin content creators were

more likely to encourage viewers to like, comment, or share (29.8%), whereas TikTok creators tended to promote individual behavioral change (32%).

Table 11. Call-to-action on TikTok and Douyin

Variable	TikTok (1 = Yes) N	TikTok (1 = Yes) %	Douyin (1 = Yes) N	Douyin (1 = Yes) %	Total (1 = Yes) N	Total (1 = Yes) %
asks viewers to like or comment	10	10.0	14	29.8	24	16.3
asks viewers to change their behavior	32	32.0	10	21.3	42	28.6
calls for collective action	2	2.0	1	2.1	3	2.0

7.1.2.2. Cross-Platform Variation in Rhetorical and Visual Styles

Focusing on the dimension of rhetorical and visual styles, this section compares the communicative strategies used across TikTok and Douyin in terms of how messages are constructed and visually delivered.

As shown in Table 12, the two most frequently used visual forms across both platforms are person talking to the camera (66%) and comparison with pictures or text (32.7%). However, their distribution varies between platforms: TikTok creators more commonly adopt talking head formats, whereas Douyin creators tend to favor edited visual contrasts or overlays to structure their narratives.

Table 12. Visual Form on TikTok and Douyin

Variable	TikTok (1 = Yes) N	TikTok (1 = Yes) %	Douyin (1 = Yes) N	Douyin (1 = Yes) %	Total (1 = Yes) N	Total (1 = Yes) %
person talking to the camera	70	70.0	27	57.4	97	66.0
comparison with pictures or text	27	27.0	21	44.7	48	32.7
situational interpretation or	12	12.0	6	12.8	18	12.2

interview, live broadcast

In terms of expressive tone, TikTok users tend to employ humorous, sarcastic, or emotionally driven language, whereas Douyin users are more inclined to adopt an analytical or objective approach when addressing greenwashing incidents. Specifically, only 2.1% of Douyin videos incorporated humor or sarcasm, in contrast to 17% of TikTok videos, highlighting a clear difference in rhetorical style across platforms.

Table 13. Expressive Tone on TikTok and Douyin

Variable	TikTok (1 = Yes) N	TikTok (1 = Yes) %	Douyin (1 = Yes) N	Douyin (1 = Yes) %	Total (1 = Yes) N	Total (1 = Yes) %
uses humor or satire	17	17.0	1	2.1	18	12.2
shows strong emotions	32	32.0	13	27.7	45	30.6
explains things logically	28	28.0	20	42.6	48	32.7
just states the facts	26	26.0	16	34.0	42	28.6

7.1.2.3. Cross-Platform Comparison of Cultural Orientations

Regarding value orientation, TikTok videos more frequently emphasized individual perspectives (77%), while Douyin videos predominantly reflected collective concerns and benefits (74.5%). This contrast suggests that TikTok creators tend to frame greenwashing as a matter of personal feeling or responsibility, whereas Douyin creators are more inclined to anchor their critiques within broader societal or group-level narratives ($\chi^2 = 59.28$, $p < 0.001$).

Table 14. Value Orientation on TikTok and Douyin

Category	TikTok (N)	TikTok (%)	Douyin (N)	Douyin (%)	Total (N)	Total (%)

focuses on personal views or feelings	77	77.0	5	10.6	82	55.8
focuses on group interests or shared responsibility	22	22.0	35	74.5	57	38.8
no clear value position	1	1.0	7	14.9	8	5.4
Total	100	100.0	47	100.0	147	100.0

In terms of critique style, both platforms demonstrate a similar preference for direct expression, with 79% of TikTok videos and 76.6% of Douyin videos adopting this approach. Despite the small numerical difference, the overall rhetorical tendency appears consistent across both platforms.

Table 15. Critique Style on TikTok and Douyin

Category	TikTok (N)	TikTok (%)	Douyin (N)	Douyin (%)	Total (N)	Total (%)
Direct	79	79.9	36	76.6	115	78.2
Indirect	15	15.0	5	10.6	20	13.6
Not Present	6	6.0	6	12.8	12	8.2
Total	100	100.0	47	100.0	147	100.0

7.1.3. Narrative Strategies and User Engagement

Building on the descriptive comparisons above, this section further investigates how specific narrative strategies relate to user engagement across platforms. To address the analysis under Research Question one, a regression-based approach is applied to examine which narrative characteristics are most closely associated with higher levels of audience interaction.

The independent variables reflect key narrative features identified in the coding phase, for instance, whether a video assigns blame to industry or government, uses humor or sarcasm, or encourages behavioral change. The dependent variable is a

composite engagement score, derived from the number of likes, comments, shares, and favorites.

In the TikTok dataset, several narrative strategies appeared to be associated with higher user engagement. Among them, blaming industry showed the strongest relationship, with a standardized effect size of 0.21, indicating a moderately positive impact. Other strategies such as using humor or sarcasm, shifting responsibility to consumers, and encouraging behavioral change also showed positive associations, suggesting that emotionally expressive and critical narratives tend to resonate more strongly with audiences on the platform.

Table 16. Regression Summary for TikTok Narrative Variables

Variable	Standardized Coefficients Beta	Sig.
environmental responsibility is pushed onto consumers	0.173	0.076
asks viewers to change their behavior	0.166	0.093
uses humor or satire	0.195	0.051
says the whole industry is greenwashing	0.205	0.041
blames the government for poor regulation	0.176	0.066

By contrast, the Douyin dataset revealed a different pattern of associations between narrative strategies and user engagement. The most pronounced effect was found for greenwashing in operations, which had a standardized effect size of 0.46, suggesting that videos highlighting inconsistencies in corporate practices tended to generate more user interaction. In addition, strategies such as prioritizing profit over everything framing and critiques of collective action also showed notable relationships, pointing to a preference for institutional or governance-oriented critiques over emotionally mobilizing appeals.

Table 17. Regression Summary for Douyin Narrative Variables

Variable	Standardized Coefficients Beta	Sig.
operations claim to be green but	0.458	0.067

Variable	Standardized Coefficients Beta	Sig.
aren't		
prioritizes profit over everything	0.370	0.086
calls for collective action	-0.352	0.082

While user engagement on both platforms appears to be shaped by narrative strategies, the specific elements that resonate with audiences differ. On TikTok, users tend to respond more strongly to blame-oriented narratives, particularly those directed at industry. Such content often frames greenwashing as a personal or moral failing, prompting direct emotional responses. In contrast, Douyin engagement is more closely associated with narratives that expose systemic operational issues or emphasize economic priorities over environmental responsibility. This contrast illustrates how platform-specific cultural values shape the way greenwashing narratives are framed and received, with TikTok emphasizing personal critique and Douyin reflecting collective perspectives.

While the quantitative findings reveal general patterns in narrative strategies and engagement, they offer limited insight into how these strategies are enacted by content creators on TikTok and Douyin. To address this, the following section offers a qualitative analysis of selected high-engagement call-to-action videos, focusing on their narrative framing and multimodal expression in situated ways.

7.2. Qualitative Findings

While the quantitative analysis highlighted key statistical differences between platforms, the qualitative phase explores how these differences are constructed and expressed through user narratives. In order to deepen the understanding of how call-to-action critiques of corporate greenwashing are framed and expressed across different cultural contexts, this section applies the theoretical framework and coding scheme developed in the quantitative analysis stage to interpret six representative videos. These cases were selected from TikTok and Douyin based on their

engagement levels and framing diversity, and are renumbered as T1, T2, T3 (TikTok) and D1, D2, D3 (Douyin).

7.2.1. TikTok

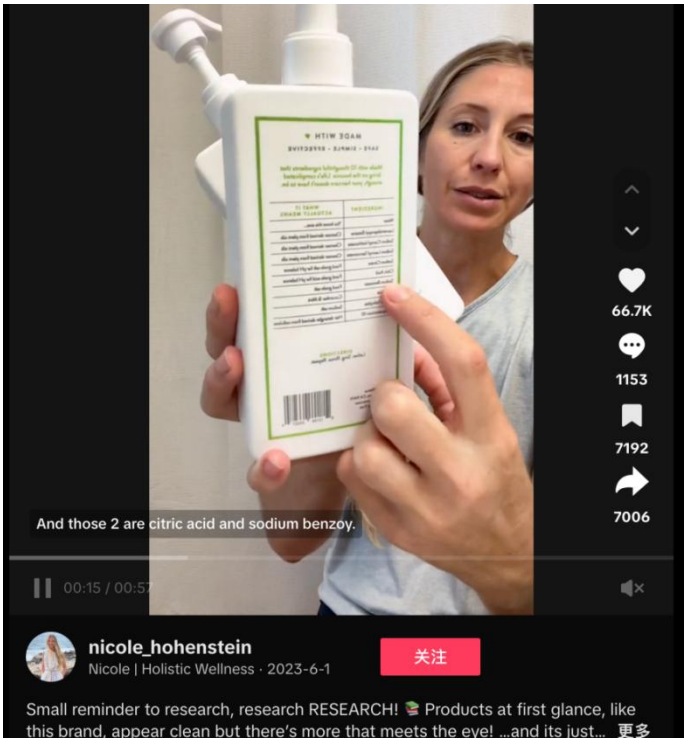
This subsection analyzes three high-engagement TikTok videos to examine how content creators construct call-to-action critiques of corporate greenwashing on the platform.

Video T1 was posted by a wellness-oriented TikTok creator who holds a bottle of Native-brand shampoo and conditioner. This case can be clearly categorized as an individual consumer (which accounts for 93% of the sample) critiquing greenwashing in the personal care industry. The simple green-and-white packaging reflects what Parguel et al. (2015) define as executional greenwashing at the product-level, where natural elements are used to mislead consumers. The statement "*It says that it is made with ten thoughtful ingredients"* further supports the quantitative finding that 70% of TikTok videos in the sample focus on corporate greenwashing through advertising or marketing strategies.

The creator repeatedly emphasizes that she has done her own research, for example, "*I've done a little bit of research*," and uses "*research, research, RESEARCH"* as the video title to strengthen the credibility of her critique. This also functions as a treatment recommendation, one of the core framing functions, as she encourages viewers to "*try to do a little bit of thoughtful research"* before making purchases.

From a cultural perspective, first-person statements such as "*that's where I have a problem"* reflect a low-context, individualistic orientation. The creator's calm yet firm tone, direct eye contact, and use of personal findings invite viewers to take action against deceptive green claims. Quantitative results show that 77% of TikTok videos emphasize personal views or feelings, and this framing has a notable influence on encouraging behavioral change (Standardized $\beta = 0.17$), unlike on Douyin, where the effect was not significant. The focus on specific product-level cases is characteristic of TikTok's platform culture, where personal storytelling and emotional credibility

play a key role in shaping greenwashing narratives. These patterns highlight a platform logic in which authenticity and individual accountability support the persuasive power of call-to-action critiques on TikTok.



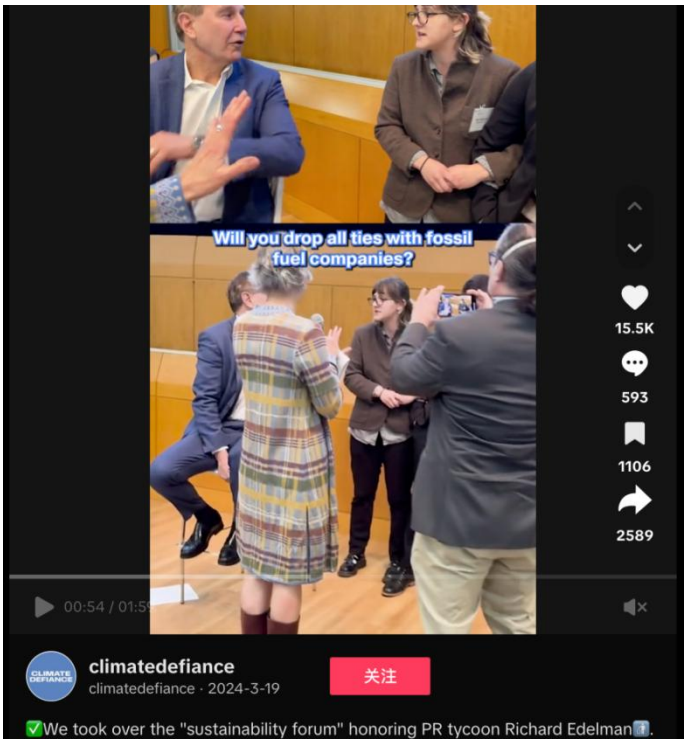
T1

Video T2 was published by a climate organization and documents a live protest targeting the CEO of Edelman, the world's largest public relations firm, over the company's long-standing partnerships with fossil fuel corporations. The protesters' core demand, "*Will you drop all of your ties with fossil fuel clients? Such as Chevron and Shell?"*, directly identifies these companies as typical examples of corporate greenwashing. This type of broad accusation aimed at the entire industry was among the most impactful narrative strategies observed in the sample (Standardized $\beta = 0.21$). Another key slogan in the video, "*Get off it! Put people over profit*," criticizes the prioritization of corporate profits over public well-being, a theme also present in approximately 18% of the videos analyzed.

The video uses minimal editing, unsteady camera movement, and on-site sound to convey a sense of urgency and realism. Visual and auditory cues such as the banner

reading "*Edelman lies, people die"* and the slogan "*Climate denial makes Richard smile"* emphasize both emotion and confrontation. Rather than remaining abstract, the video names specific individuals, companies, and consequences. In doing so, it shifts from simply commenting on greenwashing to publicly challenging it. This distinguishes the video from consumer-focused content and reflects a more activist form of engagement.

In terms of cultural framing, the tone and style of the video suggest a low-context, collectivist orientation. The protesters speak together as a group, and the text they use, such as "*we took over the forum*," underscores a shared identity. This approach contrasts with the more individualistic tone common in most TikTok content. The video illustrates that call-to-action messages on the platform are not always conveyed through personal storytelling. They can also take the form of symbolic public confrontation, where credibility is grounded in collective resistance rather than individual experience.



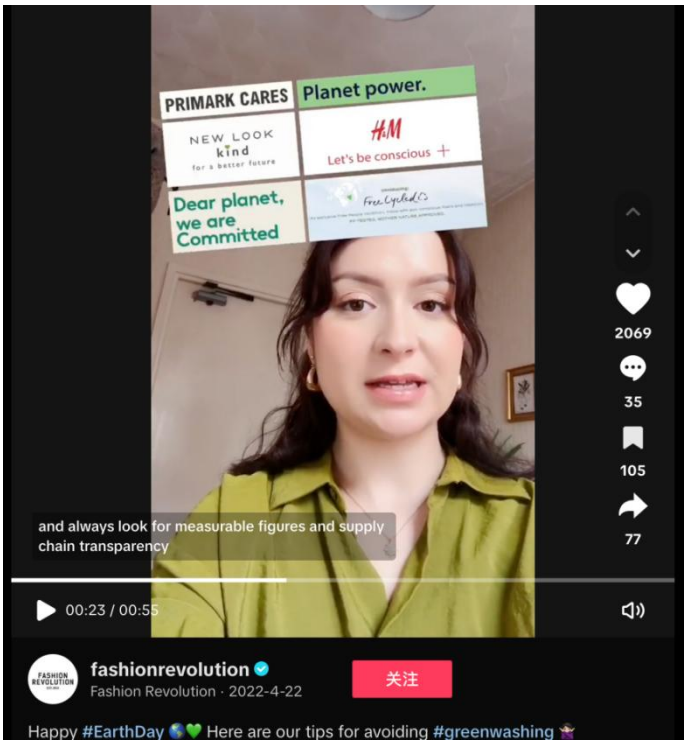
T2

Quantitative findings show that nearly half (43%) of greenwashing narratives on

TikTok are concentrated in the fast fashion industry. Video T3 represents another classic example of a call-to-action video on the platform, published by an environmental organization promoting fashion revolution. In the video, the speaker appears on screen wearing a green shirt and introduces the topic "*how to spot greenwashing*." The brands mentioned, such as H&M, Primark, and ZARA, are not directly criticized but are widely recognized as examples of greenwashing. She outlines common tactics such as "*repackaging existing products to make them look more eco-friendly"* and "*changing labels and logos or just making things green,"* which align with Lyon and Maxwell's (2011) definitions of strategic misrepresentation and intentional deception. This approach reflects a consumer-centered critique of greenwashing that emphasizes education over blame and focuses on helping viewers recognize misleading claims.

The speaker's delivery is calm and informative, supported by visual cues including Earth Day hashtags and brand overlays. Although the video does not rely on emotional appeal, it consistently encourages viewers to take action. For example, it advises audiences to "*beware of ambiguous terms like green, zero waste, and eco*," and to "*ask brands for facts and evidence to back up their claims*." This framing presents environmental awareness as a rational process grounded in personal responsibility. Previous findings also indicate that this kind of framing, which encourages behavior change on an individual level, is commonly used on TikTok. Videos that combine practical advice with well-known brand examples can be just as effective in driving engagement as more confrontational protest content.

Culturally, the video reflects a low-context, individualistic orientation. It does not reference collective identity or activism; instead, the speaker shares personal observations and suggests beginning with questions such as "*What's in my clothes?"* This tone is consistent with the dominant style of greenwashing narratives on TikTok, which tends to rely on informal credibility and accessible messaging. The video shows how call-to-action content on TikTok often works through clarity and trustworthiness, promoting change through education rather than confrontation.



T3

These cases collectively illustrate how TikTok content creators construct call-to-action critiques of corporate greenwashing through culturally embedded and rhetorically intentional strategies. Although the tone varies across examples, each video applies clear framing techniques to define the problem, assign responsibility, make moral evaluations, or recommend action. The content reflects a low-context communication style common in English-language context while also revealing a blend of individualistic and collectivist orientations depending on the chosen narrative strategy. Together, the cases show how TikTok facilitates diverse forms of environmental messaging that aim to expose greenwashing and encourage action through both instructional content and symbolic confrontation. While these patterns demonstrate the persuasive range of TikTok's call-to-action narratives, other critical voices or more structurally oriented framings may remain underrepresented on the platform.

Table 18. Narrative Strategy Coding of TikTok Call-to-Action Videos

Dimensions	T1	T2	T3
Issue emphasis	product looks eco-friendly but isn't; ads or marketing pretend to be green	operations claim to be green but aren't	product looks eco-friendly but isn't; ads or marketing pretend to be green; operations claim to be green but aren't
Blame assignment	Targets specific companies or brands	Targets specific companies or brands; says the whole industry is greenwashing	
Ethical judgement	misleads consumers on purpose; pretends to be green while causing harm	misleads consumers on purpose; pretends to be green while causing harm	misleads consumers on purpose
Call-to-action	asks viewers to change their behavior	calls for collective action	asks viewers to change their behavior
Visual form	person talking to the camera	situational interpretation or interview, live broadcast	person talking to the camera; comparison with pictures or text
Expression tone	explains things logically	shows strong emotions	explains things logically
Value orientation	focuses on personal views or feelings	focuses on group interests or shared responsibility	focuses on personal views or feelings
Critique style	Direct	Direct	Indirect

7.2.2. Douyin

This subsection examines three representative Douyin videos to explore how call-to-action critiques of corporate greenwashing are presented in the Chinese-language context.

Video D1 differs from the TikTok examples in its strong alignment with the stylistic features of Chinese-language short video culture. Created by a well-known

self-media blogger, the video introduces the concept of greenwashing through humor and indirect critique. It opens with a playful question: "*Is it environmentally friendly to throw garbage into outer space?"* The creator responds with a scientifically grounded explanation and gradually extends the discussion to the issue of greenwashing. He emphasizes that "*environmental protection should be assessed not only by the product itself but also by the entire production process."* This reflects a theme present in 53.2% of Douyin videos that focus on production-level greenwashing.

The video uses MIKO's Dinamica product as an example. The creator notes that "*while the company heavily advertises its eco-friendly image, it fails to provide concrete evidence to support its claims.*" This critique achieves ethical judgement through narrative deconstruction. The video concludes with a satirical remark suggesting that "*trash could be thrown onto a comet*," a punchline that reinforces the overall irony of the message.

Visually, the video adopts a talking-head format with a plain background and includes occasional illustrations. The creator presents a clear and well-organized argument, moving logically from the initial thought experiment to environmental principles and finally to greenwashing critique. This style reflects an analysis-oriented framing function, consistent with the "entertainment plus information" model often found on Douyin. Humor and storytelling are used to increase viewer engagement, while the overall tone remains calm and analytical. According to quantitative findings, 42.6% of Douyin videos show similar reasoning-based presentation. Rather than issuing a direct call to action, the video invites viewers to engage by liking the post, illustrating a form of interaction that aligns with platform-specific attention dynamics, as observed in 29.8% of the sample.

From a cultural perspective, the video reflects a high-context and indirect communication style commonly seen in Chinese digital discourse. It relies on implication, understatement, and shared cultural knowledge rather than direct confrontation. The creator does not claim the role of an activist or expert but appears as a culturally informed commentator offering rational reflection. This approach

aligns with broader patterns on Douyin, where environmental critique is often delivered in a more subtle and socially acceptable form. In this context, greenwashing is exposed not through overt blame but through humor, implication, and analytical demystification.

D1

The account subject of Video D2 is a textile company, but the content does not present a corporate voice and is therefore categorized as "other." The creator begins with the question "*Have you been greenwashed?"* and then introduces the definition of greenwashing. Using H&M as an example, the video warns "*consumers to beware of the 'greenwashing' trap in the fast fashion industry*" and concludes that "*rational consumers will form their own independent judgments."* The repeated use of "consumers" as a collective pronoun emphasizes public interest and shared responsibility. This call-to-action narrative strategy centers on consumers, critiques greenwashing while avoiding direct confrontation, and promotes behavioral change through increased awareness and personal discipline. This approach aligns with a common pattern on Douyin, where 74.5% of videos focus on collective interest.

In terms of audiovisual presentation, the video adopts a familiar talking-head format, filmed in a real store setting without text overlays or visual effects. The calm tone, steady eye contact, and familiar environment create a trustworthy and professional atmosphere. The creator's concise language and clear structure enhance the video's credibility and logical flow. As noted by Sun et al. (2020), Douyin users

tend to prefer a simpler and more stable media style than TikTok users, which supports the effectiveness of this grounded and explanatory approach to environmental communication.

D2

Although individual users are the main contributors (87.1%) of greenwashing narratives on both short video platforms, Douyin shows slightly more diversity in creator types. Thanks to the rapid development of the self-media industry in the Chinese-language context, 12.8% of greenwashing-related content comes from media accounts. Video D3 is an example of this, posted by an account focused on aviation news, with the title "*Airlines under investigation for greenwashing.*" Unlike other sample videos, there is no on-screen speaker; instead, the video uses voiceover narration, text, and images to report that "*several airlines, including Air France, were ordered by regulators to withdraw advertisements for making exaggerated environmental claims."*

The tone of the video is formal and objective, with no subjective commentary. Compared to other call-to-action narratives that rely on direct engagement or emotional appeal, this video aims to inform rather than provoke. It does not encourage users to take further action and lacks confrontational tone. This style corresponds with the role of institutional media on Chinese digital platforms, where credibility is often conveyed through standardized language and third-person reporting. Although the call to action is indirect, the message still encourages viewers to recognize greenwashing

as a systemic issue and frames regulatory intervention as a legitimate and necessary form of environmental governance.

D3

While less emotionally direct than their TikTok counterparts, these examples still operate as call-to-action narratives by encouraging behavioral reflection and collective awareness in culturally resonant ways. These narratives prioritize awareness over agitation, often embedding moral evaluation in indirect language, professional authority, or subtle irony. Collectively, the analysis reveals that on Douyin, persuasive environmental messaging tends to avoid emotional intensity or overt blame, instead promoting behavioral change through culturally resonant and socially acceptable discursive strategies. This supports the broader aim of the qualitative analysis, which is to explore how culturally situated forms of construction shape the ways in which call-to-action critiques of greenwashing are framed and expressed on Douyin. This pattern suggests that on Douyin, credibility is more often grounded in informational tone than emotional appeal, reflecting culturally preferred modes of persuasion.

Table 19. Narrative Strategy Coding of Douyin Call-to-Action Videos

Dimensions	D1	D2	D3
Issue emphasis	product looks eco-friendly but isn't;	ads or marketing pretend to be green;	ads or marketing pretend to be green;

Dimensions	D1	D2	D3
	ads or marketing pretend to be green; operations claim to be green but aren't	operations claim to be green but aren't	
Blame assignment		Targets specific companies or brands; says the whole industry is greenwashing	Targets specific companies or brands
Ethical judgement	misleads consumers on purpose; pretends to be green while causing harm; prioritizes profit over everything	misleads consumers on purpose; pretends to be green while causing harm	misleads consumers on purpose
Call-to-action	asks viewers to like or comment	asks viewers to change their behavior	asks viewers to like or comment
Visual form	person talking to the camera; comparison with pictures or text	person talking to the camera	comparison with pictures or text
Expression tone	uses humor or satire; explains things logically	explains things logically	just states the facts
Value orientation	focuses on group interests or shared responsibility	focuses on group interests or shared responsibility	no clear value position
Critique style	Indirect	Direct	Not Present

Taken together, the qualitative findings show that TikTok critiques often rely on personal storytelling and emotional framing to deliver call-to-action messages, while Douyin content emphasizes informational tone, indirect expression, and collective concerns. These narrative tendencies closely reflect the platform-level differences identified in the quantitative analysis, reinforcing the role of cultural orientation in shaping how greenwashing and related calls to action are framed.

8. Discussion

The findings of this study demonstrate that user-generated greenwashing narratives on TikTok and Douyin are shaped by a dynamic interplay between content creators' rhetorical strategies, platform-specific content ecologies, and broader socio-discursive norms. While previous research often attributes cross-platform variation primarily to cultural differences, this study shows that variations in industry focus, creator type, and user engagement preferences play an equally, if not more, influential role in shaping how greenwashing is framed and received.

One of the most notable divergences concerns the industries most frequently targeted. On TikTok, greenwashing critiques are heavily concentrated in consumer-facing sectors such as fast fashion and personal care. These industries lend themselves to individual-level reflection, which aligns with the dominant narrative mode observed on the platform: personal commentary, direct moral blame, and emotionally resonant storytelling. Videos that assign responsibility to specific brands, highlight deceptive marketing, or call for behavioral change tend to generate higher engagement. This pattern is reinforced by the platform's creator composition—dominated by individual users—who often position themselves as informed consumers or critical insiders. The rhetorical framing here is personal and moralistic, typically delivered through straightforward speech, satire, or emotionally expressive cues, which are well-suited to TikTok's algorithmic logic that privileges short, impactful, and relatable content.

By contrast, greenwashing narratives on Douyin are more often situated in structurally embedded sectors such as ESG-related finance and energy, indicating a distinct thematic orientation. Rather than foregrounding lifestyle consumption, many Douyin videos critique operational inconsistencies or institutional failures, and some explicitly call attention to the shortcomings of regulatory systems. Notably, government-related accountability appears in over 30% of Douyin videos—five times more frequently than on TikTok—signaling a more systemic framing of

greenwashing. This emphasis is further supported by the greater presence of journalists, business owners, and media-affiliated creators on the platform. These creators often adopt a measured tone and rely on analytical framing or formal news-style narration, which appears to resonate with Douyin's audience, as videos emphasizing operational critique receive higher levels of engagement compared to more emotionally expressive content.

The distinct patterns of narrative framing and user interaction across the two platforms suggest that while cultural orientations—such as individualism versus collectivism—remain relevant, they are insufficient to explain the full scope of variation. Instead, these differences are better understood as outcomes of platform-specific affordances and content governance models. On TikTok, the personalization-driven recommendation system incentivizes direct, emotionally salient content that speaks to individual agency. On Douyin, content appears to be filtered through a more curated environment where institutional and informational framing holds greater visibility and legitimacy.

Furthermore, the qualitative findings reveal that even similar message intentions are articulated through different expressive modes. TikTok videos often combine storytelling with satire or emotionally inflected appeals, while Douyin videos lean toward structured narration and fact-based critique. The former seeks identification and reaction; the latter, comprehension and reflection. This divergence in expressive style is not merely stylistic—it affects how responsibility is assigned, how solutions are proposed, and how users are expected to respond. TikTok calls for vigilance and consumer self-regulation, while Douyin subtly gestures toward systemic reform and regulatory accountability.

Overall, this study contributes to a more nuanced understanding of how greenwashing discourse is mediated by short video platforms. Rather than treating TikTok and Douyin as culturally determined opposites, the findings point to an evolving landscape of environmental communication shaped by the interaction between narrative strategy, platform logic, and institutional context. These insights suggest the importance of tailoring sustainability messaging not only to cultural

values but also to the content infrastructures and rhetorical expectations embedded within each media environment.

Limitations and Future Research Directions

This study has several limitations. First, the imbalance in sample size between TikTok and Douyin, resulting from the limited availability of greenwashing-related content on Douyin, may affect the representativeness of platform-specific trends and limit generalizability. Second, engagement metrics were evaluated without accounting for variables such as algorithmic amplification, follower base, or posting time. These factors may significantly influence content visibility regardless of narrative strategy.

Third, the focus on high-engagement videos and the use of broad creator categories may overlook more nuanced differences in creator identity, credibility, and influence. While individual users are the dominant creators on both platforms, Douyin includes a more varied group, such as media-affiliated accounts and business owners. These actors may shape narrative tone and audience perception in ways not fully captured by the current analysis.

In addition, this study does not examine how platform governance structures influence content circulation. Content moderation practices, keyword filtering, and algorithmic ranking systems may determine which greenwashing critiques are promoted, marginalized, or reframed, thus affecting the boundaries of public discourse on sustainability.

Future research could address these limitations by incorporating qualitative audience data, such as comment analysis or interviews, to better understand how users interpret and respond to different greenwashing frames. Further investigation into platform governance and recommendation systems would help clarify how environmental narratives are shaped by digital infrastructures. Comparative studies involving additional languages and regions, particularly those in under-researched or emerging markets, would offer broader insights. Longitudinal research could also explore how greenwashing discourse evolves over time in response to regulatory changes, environmental events, or shifts in public attention.

9. Conclusion

This study investigated how greenwashing narratives are constructed on TikTok and Douyin through a mixed-method approach. The analysis revealed that TikTok videos are more likely to use emotionally expressive, blame-oriented narratives targeting fast fashion or personal care brands, and such content tends to generate significantly higher engagement. In contrast, Douyin videos more frequently critique operational inconsistencies in ESG-related finance sectors, with higher engagement observed for narratives that adopt a neutral, evidence-based tone. These patterns reflect not only cultural communication styles but also differences in creator composition, industry focus, and platform affordances.

While the study faces certain limitations, such as sample imbalance and the absence of algorithmic data, it contributes to a more detailed understanding of how sustainability-related discourse takes shape across different digital environments. The results suggest that greenwashing critiques are shaped not only by cultural communication styles but also by industry relevance, creator type, and platform-specific norms. Future research could explore audience interpretations and examine how platform governance and recommendation systems influence which types of environmental narratives gain visibility. A deeper understanding of these dynamics can support the development of more effective and context-sensitive environmental communication strategies.

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11. Appendix A

This appendix presents the coding scheme used for the quantitative content analysis. Each variable was operationalized based on theoretical frameworks relevant to framing functions, rhetorical and visual styles, and cultural orientations. The table below lists all coded variables, their types, assigned values, and brief definitions where applicable.

Variable	Type	Code	Definition
creator type	Categorical	0 = Individual; 1 = Environmental Organization; 2 = Journalist/Media Outlet; 3 = Other	Classification based on the identity of the account owner, inferred from profile description or video content.
industry context	Categorical	0 = Fast Fashion/Apparel; 1 = Food & Beverage; 2 = Beauty & Personal Care; 3 = Energy/Aviation; 4 = Fast Moving Consumer Goods; 5 = Technology/Electric Vehicles; 6 = ESG-related finance / Investment; 7 = Other / Multiple	Determined by the type of business or sector mentioned or implied in the video.
product looks eco-friendly but isn't	Binary	0 = No; 1 = Yes	Misleading environmental claims embedded in the physical design, composition, or functional use of the product itself (e.g., material sourcing, biodegradability, or product performance).

ads or marketing pretend to be green	Binary	0 = No; 1 = Yes	False or exaggerated sustainability claims communicated through advertisements, product packaging, labels, brand messaging, or social media content, designed to influence consumer perception.
operations claim to be green but aren't	Binary	0 = No; 1 = Yes	Deceptive practices related to how products are made, transported, or operated, including supply chain and labor practices.
environmental responsibility is pushed onto consumers	Binary	0 = No; 1 = Yes	Marketing that shifts the burden of environmental action onto consumers instead of corporate accountability.
targets specific companies or brands	Binary	0 = No; 1 = Yes	Critique explicitly targets a named company or brand for misleading environmental claims.
says the whole industry is greenwashing	Binary	0 = No; 1 = Yes	Critique targets an entire sector or industry rather than individual companies.
says consumers are part of the problem	Binary	0 = No; 1 = Yes	Blame is placed on consumer ignorance, apathy, or behavior contributing to greenwashing.
blames the government for poor regulation	Binary	0 = No; 1 = Yes	Critique directed at weak regulations or policy failure enabling greenwashing.
misleads consumers on purpose	Binary	0 = No; 1 = Yes	Portrays greenwashing as dishonest and confusing to the public.
pretends to be green while causing harm	Binary	0 = No; 1 = Yes	Points out contradictions between a company's green claims and harmful behaviors.

prioritizes profit over everything	Binary	0 = No; 1 = Yes	Criticism that highlights how a company prioritizes profit over environmental responsibility, often using sustainability messaging to justify practices that are ultimately profit-driven or harmful to the planet.
asks viewers to like or comment	Binary	0 = No; 1 = Yes	Urges the audience to engage by commenting, liking, or sharing to raise awareness.
asks viewers to change their behavior	Binary	0 = No; 1 = Yes	Suggests viewers adopt more sustainable personal behaviors.
calls for collective action	Binary	0 = No; 1 = Yes	Calls for organized action like protests, petitions, or boycotts.
person talking to the camera	Binary	0 = No; 1 = Yes	Creator speaks directly to the camera, often using minimal editing.
comparison with pictures or text	Binary	0 = No; 1 = Yes	Video uses captions, split-screens, or visual comparisons to emphasize the critique.
situational interpretation or interview, live broadcast	Binary	0 = No; 1 = Yes	The creator reenacts or performs a scenario to parody or dramatize greenwashing.
uses humor or satire	Binary	0 = No; 1 = Yes	Uses parody, irony, or exaggerated humor to criticize greenwashing.
shows strong emotions	Binary	0 = No; 1 = Yes	Expresses strong emotions like sadness, anger, or hope to engage the viewer.
explains things logically	Binary	0 = No; 1 = Yes	Uses logical reasoning, evidence, or policy critique to expose greenwashing.

just states the facts	Binary	0 = No; 1 = Yes	Delivers information in a neutral, fact-based tone without overt judgment.
value orientation	Categorical	0 = focuses on personal views or feelings	The video centers on the speaker's own opinions, choices, or consumer behavior, using first-person expressions.
value orientation	Categorical	1 = focuses on group interests or shared responsibility	The video emphasizes societal responsibility or group action using collective pronouns or appeals to public good.
value orientation	Categorical	2 = no clear value position	The video does not clearly reflect either a personal or collective stance; focuses on description or evidence.
critique style	Categorical	0 = Direct	It uses strong language, direct phrasing, or clearly frames something as wrong or deceptive.
critique style	Categorical	1 = Indirect	The critique is subtle, uses metaphor, implication, satire, or narrative without directly naming the target.
critique style	Categorical	2 = Not Present	No explicit or implicit critique is expressed in the video.
The numbers of likes	Continuous	number	The total number of "likes" received on a video, reflecting positive viewer reception.
The numbers of comments	Continuous	number	The total number of public comments left by viewers. Indicates engagement depth and discussion.
The numbers of favorites	Continuous	number	The total number of times users added the video to their personal favorites list. Reflects long-term value.

The numbers of shares	Continuous	number	The total number of times the video was shared by users, indicating content virality.