



STRAT 7



Consumer Understanding of Green Disposal Claims in Ads

Qualitative Research Report

November 2023



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1. Executive Summary

The Advertising Standards Authority (ASA) is the UK's independent regulator of advertising. It applies the UK Code of Non-broadcast Advertising and Direct & Promotional Marketing and the UK Code of Broadcast Advertising (the Advertising Codes) written by the Committee of Advertising Practice (CAP) and Broadcast Committee of Advertising Practice (BCAP). The ASA ensures ads across all media are legal, decent, honest and truthful, taking action where ads are misleading, harmful, offensive or otherwise irresponsible.

The ASA has been regulating environmental claims for decades to ensure consumers are not misled and that ads are responsible. The Government has set ambitious targets to respond to climate change. In response, the ASA has been exploring how it can continue to play its part, by effectively regulating misleading environmental claims and ensuring that ads are making responsible claims. In September 2021¹, the ASA set out key next steps following a review of its regulation in this area, including a commitment to undertake consumer research to inform its application of the Advertising Codes.

In 2022, the ASA published the findings² of its investigation into consumer understanding of carbon neutral and net zero claims and terminology used in ads for electric and hybrid vehicles. In June 2022³, the ASA announced its plans to commission research into the consumer understanding of two further areas: recycled, recyclable, biodegradable, compostable and other disposal claims (henceforth referred to as 'green disposal claims'); and environmental claims used in food and drink ads.

The ASA commissioned a qualitative study, consisting of 60 in-depth interviews, conducted across the UK. The study was split into two modules with 30 in-depth interviews exploring green disposal claims in ads (Module 1), and 30 in-depth interviews exploring claims in food and drink ads (Module 2). The sample included participants from different demographic groups, locations, and varying levels of engagement with the subject matter. The sample for Module 2 also included vegans, vegetarians and individuals with meat-inclusive diets.

This report focuses on the findings of Module 1, looking at green disposal claims in ads. The report setting out the findings of Module 2 will be published separately, in due course.

1.1. Summary of findings

Overall attitudes to the environment across the entire sample

Participants were aware and accepting of climate change as one of the most important issues facing society today. Most participants accepted climate change as a fact, though few claimed to understand or engage fully with the topic in depth. Responsibility for tackling climate change was seen as one shared by all. Leadership was expected from government and international bodies - and the role of big corporations and those seen to be 'most guilty' of high emissions was seen as vital.

Most participants felt that on an individual level, they 'did their bit'. There was a degree of defensiveness when talking about personally doing more – asserting the suggestion that moral

¹ <https://www.asa.org.uk/news/asa-statement-on-the-regulation-of-environmental-claims-and-issues-in-advertising.html>

² <https://www.asa.org.uk/resource/climate-change-and-the-environment-consumer-understanding-of-environmental-claims.html>

³ <https://www.asa.org.uk/news/asa-statement-on-world-environment-day.html>

responsibility lay with the businesses that created the problem, and influence over them lay with government and international bodies.

While levels of engagement varied across the sample, three kinds of individual activity emerged:

- **Action undertaken at home:** mainly related to recycling and food waste management. Most engaged on this level and felt a sense of pride in doing so.
- **Consumer action:** where participants factored environmental choices into their purchase decisions. For many, though, cost considerations overrode environmental considerations.
- **Life activism:** a few of the most engaged factored environmental impact into almost everything they did, including diet, travel and shopping habits. They were the most cynical about corporate environmental claims.

Environmental claims in advertising

There was an uncritical acceptance of environmental claims in advertising across the sample.

Participants believed advertising was highly monitored and regulated in the UK, so generally assumed brands were unable to make environmental claims without evidence and verification. This was particularly the case if ads included statistics, facts or used more technical terms.

A minority were more questioning of these claims, including:

- the more environmentally engaged who were more interested in investigating claims further and were more sensitive to potential cases of 'greenwashing';
- general business sceptics who lack trust in big corporations and the claims they make (in advertising as well as other contexts);
- vegans and vegetarians who were generally more used to approaching claims and products with greater scrutiny.

Approaches to green disposal management

Green disposal management was perceived as a manageable way for consumers to 'do their bit' for the environment; though it was mainly engaged with at the point of disposal, rather than the point of purchase, and only if it felt convenient. While participants appreciated that individual waste management was important in helping to tackle climate change and to care for the environment, they generally adopted an unquestioning stance. Most did not engage with green disposal management beyond the point of home disposal and, with strong faith in the waste management system, they were confident that if a product was thrown in the 'right bin', an undefined 'upstream power' (some pointed to local authorities) would take care of the technical processes to dispose of products properly and ethically.

Participants saw the home as a 'sandbox' around their environmental efforts when it came to green disposal. While most were taking steps to manage disposal at home (particularly recycling), where there was a requirement to travel outside of the home for a product to be disposed of properly, most were resistant and/or became disengaged.

Additional requirements placed around disposal were treated not just as an inconvenience, but as a breaking of an unspoken agreement, where manufacturers played their part (making items seamlessly disposable) and the consumer played theirs (home disposal). It complicated the perceived simplicity of the process and it could lead to criticism of the brand making these demands, particularly if the

requirement was not clearly communicated, leading to anger or even disengagement from the process.

There were two broad ‘camps’ when it came to green disposal management, though both still felt positive about their contribution, and satisfied that they ‘did their bit’:

- **The ‘Do-enoughers’** who tended not to think about the environmental impact of throwing a product away beyond the point of disposal and assumed the details were dealt with upstream. This group made up the majority of the sample, particularly those with low or medium engagement in environmental topics.
- **The ‘Go-beyonders’** who took pride in taking care over waste management and invested more time to sort through and separate materials. This group were also more conscious of the potential for things going wrong (e.g., through the contamination of recycling with food produce) and were more likely to be critical of others around them (e.g., neighbours not making the effort). This group made up a minority of the total sample, with strongest presence within the high engagement demographic.

Green disposal claims in an advertising context

Use of green disposal terms in advertising seemed like a good idea in theory and most participants presumed all terms explored were wholly positive for the environment, and brands were being truthful and transparent in using them. There was general, blind acceptance of what advertisers claimed (particularly smaller, lesser-known brands). This could risk consumers having an oversimplified understanding of the terms and disposal process and providing a sense ‘the issue was being dealt with’ without requiring consumers to engage with the complexities.

There was a general assumption that responsible disposal (of recyclable, compostable and biodegradable materials) was possible from the home. The use of these words in advertising was therefore assumed to imply home disposal, unless clearly stated otherwise. There was a general sense that if environmentally conscious disposal involved activities outside the home, then not only should this be made clear, but the onus lay with government/business to make these services as accessible and convenient as possible.

When looking at spontaneous understanding of the terms tested, ‘recyclable’ and ‘recycled’ were the most familiar and easy to describe. However, participants tended not to be engaged with the detail and showed little interest or understanding in the complexities or stages of the recycling process. Some participants presumed most packaging and products were created to be recyclable ‘these days’.

The terms ‘compostable’ and ‘biodegradable’ were less well understood and often confused with one another. Participants often made generalised and oversimplified assumptions about how products described as compostable and biodegradable could be disposed of, particularly as it was not something they engaged with day-to-day (as they did with recycling). Some participants believed compostable products could result in ‘usable’ outcomes (e.g., soil), whereas biodegradable implied the product would vanish altogether.

Exposure to definitions of green disposal claims led to a variety of reactions from participants, ranging from surprise and disbelief to frustration and a sense of validated scepticism.

Views towards brands using the terms ‘recyclable’ and ‘recycled’ did not change significantly when definitions and specific conditions related to the terms were shared. While some felt the additional detail was ‘interesting’ - with disposal location emerging as one of the most important factors to be

explained when a product is described as 'recyclable' - it was generally not felt to impact how brands can and should use the terms in advertising. For some, it was concerning to learn about the potential for contamination of the recycling bin with the incorrect disposal of non-recyclable plastics or compostable items.

However, understanding the complexities behind the terms 'compostable' and 'biodegradable' provoked stronger reactions of surprise, confusion, frustration, and, in some cases, anger, with some participants concerned the terms were misleading without sufficient qualification. For:

- **'compostable'**, this concern came when a product was advertised as 'compostable' but required specific and specialised conditions and processes;
- **'biodegradable'**, the unlimited timeframe and potential for toxin creation was shocking to some and disappointing for all. There was a strong belief that without significant qualification the term should not be used. Some argued the word should not be used at all.

After learning the definitions of the terms explored, most participants felt strongly that there should be stronger rules around their use in advertising. Participant motivation was reliant on the belief that their actions made a difference and were vital to combating climate change. They felt pride in 'doing their bit' – so it was potentially demotivating for participants to hear that these terms were more complex, and their current behaviours were possibly not as meaningful as they hoped.

There was also a feeling that using the definitions whilst placing the primary burden for fulfilment on the consumer was a little disingenuous and a small number of participants directly called brands out for 'greenwashing' after learning of the definitions of the terms.

Lesser-known brands making claims were perceived as more genuine than larger global corporations, with participants assuming the brand encompassed the environment into their whole ethos.

Participants desired clearly and prominently communicated information in four key areas:

- **Product composition:** participants wanted clearer information on which parts of a product were/were not recyclable, biodegradable or compostable.
- **Disposal location:** participants wanted to know where the product should be disposed as this was crucial to whether they felt they could really 'do their bit'.
- **Length of time:** understanding how long a product takes to break down when claims say they are compostable or biodegradable felt vital and without this information, claims were considered misleading.
- **Outcome of disposal:** participants sought transparency about disposal processes and, particularly with regards to biodegradability, felt strongly that brands should have to declare if a product has the potential to create harmful by-products.

Given their complexity, there was a sense that brands should consider taking a holistic approach to qualifying and elaborating on these terms, including on packaging, in ads and on their websites. It was felt important that any additional information should strike the right balance between greater accuracy and ensuring continuing motivation, to avoid the risk of disillusionment that could come with increased knowledge.

2. Introduction

2.1. Research background

The Advertising Standards Authority (ASA) is the UK's independent regulator of advertising. It applies the Advertising Codes written by the Committee of Advertising Practice (CAP) and Broadcast Committee of Advertising Practice (BCAP). The ASA ensures ads across all media are legal, decent, honest and truthful, taking action where ads are misleading, harmful, offensive or otherwise irresponsible.

The conclusions of the 2021 Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC) [report](#) highlighted the role of human activity in intensifying the pace of climate change and the need for a change in consumer behaviour if targets are to be met. Advertising plays an important part in reflecting and, potentially, endorsing and encouraging consumer behaviours and helping consumers make informed choices.

The ASA has been regulating environmental claims for decades to ensure consumers are not misled and that ads are responsible. The Government has set ambitious targets to respond to climate change. In response, the ASA has been exploring how it can continue to play its part by effectively regulating misleading environmental claims and ensuring ads are responsible. In [September 2021](#)⁴, following a review of its regulation in this area, the ASA set out key next steps, including a commitment to undertake consumer research to inform its application of the rules.

An [investigation](#)⁵ into consumer understanding of environment-based terminology used in ads, initially focusing on carbon neutral and net zero claims and sector-specific terminology used in the electric and hybrid motoring sector, was undertaken in 2022. This, along with a number of significant rulings involving advertisers, often in high carbon intensity sectors, led to the [publication](#)⁶ of updated guidance to assist with the interpretation of Code rules that concern environment-related advertising issues.

In [June 2022](#)⁷ the ASA announced its commitment to a second consumer research project, this time focusing on the use of green disposal claims made in ads, and claims made in ads across the food and drink sectors.

Jigsaw Research was commissioned to conduct this qualitative study on behalf of the ASA to build a base of knowledge on consumer attitudes and understanding in these areas in order to inform the ASA's regulation of relevant claims made in ads.

2.2. Research objectives

The key objectives of the research were to investigate:

- consumer understanding of key environmental claims made in ads;
- how understanding of these terms applies or is dependent on the context of the ad or product sector;

⁴ <https://www.asa.org.uk/news/asa-statement-on-the-regulation-of-environmental-claims-and-issues-in-advertising.html>

⁵ <https://www.asa.org.uk/resource/climate-change-and-the-environment-consumer-understanding-of-environmental-claims.html>

⁶ <https://www.asa.org.uk/news/update-to-cap-and-bcap-guidance-on-misleading-environmental-claims.html>

⁷ <https://www.asa.org.uk/news/asa-statement-on-world-environment-day.html>

- if, and how, consumers' understanding of these terms influences their purchasing decisions.

The study was designed to explore two key areas.

Module 1: Green disposal claims in ads

This module covers an investigation of consumer understanding of green disposal terminology used in ads, specifically:

- recycled
- recyclable
- biodegradable
- compostable

The focus was on investigating what consumers understand from these claims, within the context of specific ads.

Module 2: Environmental terminology in food and drink ads

Ads for food and drink products that seek to highlight environmental benefits, including for meat and dairy products and their 'meat-free' and 'dairy-free' alternatives, tend not to use claims that are common across different ads.

So, in this module we explored consumer attitudes to a range of ads featuring different creative styles and terms to gauge the overall impression given by the ad and how this was interpreted. Comparative claims (which state or imply that the product is better, etc. than others) are likely to be prevalent in this area, as well as the use of phrases such as: 'good for you'; 'good for the planet'; and 'sustainably sourced'.

This report focuses on the findings for Module 1. The report setting out the findings of Module 2 will be published separately, in due course.

2.3. Research methodology

A qualitative approach was felt to be the most appropriate given the objectives of the project. The discursive nature of qualitative research is better suited for exploratory studies where the goal is to understand behaviours and attitudes, rather than simply to describe them. It is also the only approach potentially sensitive enough to distinguish between idealised and real behaviours and motivations – which is important with subjects like the environment where social norms are strong.

The two most common methodologies in qualitative research are the group discussion and the one-to-one in-depth interview. The in-depth interview was selected for this study rather than the group discussion because it:

- allows a greater sense of an individual's attitudes, motivations and beliefs:
- is less likely to encourage posturing than the group environment:
- is a better vehicle to gauge comprehension of words and concepts.

Given ongoing concerns over the Covid-19 pandemic, it was agreed that the interviews would be conducted online. The sessions lasted between 30 and 60 minutes and followed a discussion guide agreed upon in advance with the ASA. Fieldwork took place between 22 March and 17 May 2023.

2.4. Research sample

The project was comprised of 60 in-depth interviews, split between the two modules, with 30 interviews conducted as part of Module 1 looking at green disposal claims and terminology, and 30 interviews conducted as part of Module 2 looking at claims made in food and drink ads.

The objective of qualitative research is not to generate statistically valid findings, but to ensure the sample is broad enough to capture the range and variety of potential responses. The appropriate sample size in a qualitative study should be sufficient to allow for confirmatory findings without generating repetitive data (saturation).

Given the objectives of the study, the number of stimuli and the number of potential sub-groups, a sample size of 30 was felt to be appropriate. A sample of 30 interviews is generally viewed as robust by market research experts.

The structure of the sample was designed to mirror the UK demographic makeup, including an appropriate spread of socio-economic groups, life stages and family households. Additionally, the sample incorporated the following criteria:

- **Locations:** Fieldwork was conducted across the four nations and included a mix of urban and rural locations.
- **Ethnicity and gender:** An even split of gender and representation of Black, Asian and Minority Ethnic groups.
- **Age range:** The sample was made up overwhelmingly of individuals aged 18 to 65 years, though there were a small proportion of respondents whose ages were outside of this range.
- **Environmental engagement:** A spectrum of more and less engaged participants were included – engagement levels were determined through responses to a range of attitudinal statements at the recruitment stage.

Full details of the sample achieved can be found in Appendix 7.4.

2.5. Interview structure

Interviews in both modules followed a similar structure and were designed to gain insight into participants' understanding of and attitudes towards the claims. Descriptors were explored in the context of overall reactions to the ad stimulus used in the interviews.

Being qualitative in nature, the interviews were flexible, allowing the conversation to be sensitive and responsive to the priorities of the individual participant. However, a consistent outline flow was adopted:

- Following on from the introductions, discussions started with initial exposure to the ad stimulus and exploration of general reactions with up to six ads, from a range of media, shared with each participant. Discussions allowed for any reaction to the term/descriptor/claim to emerge at a spontaneous level.

- This was followed by a general discussion about the participant's attitudes to environmental issues and an exploration of any environmental action or environmentally inspired behaviours they engaged in.
- We then explored the understanding of the terms recycled, recycling, biodegradable and compostable before sharing definitions of each and exploring reactions individually and overall attitudes to similar claims used in advertising.
- The ads were then revisited to explore whether the definitions had changed perceptions, understanding or feelings about the advertising.

Appendix 7.3 sets out the definitions of the terminology presented to participants. The definitions include details around some of the conditions that are required for effective disposal of in each case and were compiled with input and advice from Dr Carl Boardman (Lecturer in Energy and Environmental Sciences at the Open University's School of Engineering & Innovation).

2.6. Stimulus material

The ASA provided a broad range of advertising examples for each module, covering:

- Different media (TV, press, radio, outdoor and digital).
- A range of sectors relevant to each module.
- A variety of creative styles (e.g., some more formal, others more playful).

There were 26 pieces of stimulus in Module 1 and 32 in Module 2. A rotation was designed to ensure balanced coverage across the sample. Each ad was viewed approximately six times.

The ads used in Module 1 were grouped by theme (covering the terms recycled, recyclable, compostable and biodegradable) to ensure each participant was exposed to a variety of terms and claims.

During the sessions, the stimulus was shared on screen. Participants were asked to join the interviews using a laptop so that they were able to see and hear clearly what was being shown.

The stimulus is referenced throughout, and a summary of each ad can be found in Appendix 7.2. References to specific ads are denoted by the brand name and a number corresponding to the relevant ad on the stimulus list, e.g., Waitrose¹ refers to the Waitrose ad listed as number 1 in the appendix.

3. Attitudes to environmental issues

3.1. General attitudes and behaviours

Note: Attitudes and feelings around climate change were not explored in detail, but discussed briefly in their own right, in addition to emerging spontaneously in reaction to the claims, descriptors and the advertising stimuli. Findings in this section are based on discussions covered in both Module 1 and Module 2.

Participants were aware and accepting of climate change as one of the most important issues facing society today. Most felt they had an individual responsibility to minimise their environmental impact, though believed the bulk of responsibility lay with those in 'power' (i.e., Government and international bodies) and those considered most guilty of high emissions (i.e., larger corporations and high carbon emitting sectors of the economy).

Environmentalism is part of modern life

There was a sense that climate change was the predominant media and cultural subject of our times. Many accepted this was entirely appropriate given the scale and seriousness of the challenge. Participants were often unable to specify from where they received information about the subject, instead feeling it was coming from 'everywhere' in society and culture, certainly from media, Government, campaigning organisations and brands. Younger participants had learned about the issue at school.

It was seen as a challenging topic to understand and few, irrespective of engagement levels, claimed to understand the subject fully:

I am quite informed. Try to keep on top of things but if you knew everything you'd be overwhelmed.

(Wales, Female, 30, High Engagement)

I am no expert ... I know we are very behind on global warming.

(England, Male, 28, Medium Engagement)

Across the sample range, climate change was accepted as proven fact. Most participants also accepted human agency – and human ability to slow or, at least limit, the pace of climate change. Some of the less engaged were more sceptical about the impact of consumer, industry and governmental action – but not the threat itself.

There was a background feeling for some that environmentalism had become part of the fabric of life, and for so long, that it had slightly diluted the sense of urgency around it. At the time of conducting fieldwork, the risk of escalation of the war in Ukraine into a nuclear confrontation seemed like a much more immediate threat to some.

We are not short of things to be worried about at the moment, are we?

(England, Male, 34 Low Engagement)

The role of the young leading the fight was recognised and broadly welcomed. Some of the older participants joked about how their children would lecture them on environmental issues. However, attitudes to protest activity were much more varied, with some very critical of some environmental campaign groups.

Responsibility for tackling climate change was seen as one shared by all. Leadership was expected from international organisations and governments, but the role of big corporations and individuals was also seen as vital.

We all [have a] part to play – we need to come to combine our voices to pressure companies.

(Wales, Female, 30, High Engagement)

We are all responsible and [have a] role to play but [it] must start with education.

(England, Male, 28, Medium Engagement)

Need to start at [the] top and each player play its part ... Gov, biz, local council, individual.

(England, Male, 22, High Engagement)

I imagine the government would have climate advisors, and that would filter down. And if we needed to be told that we needed to stop or reduce or do something, I would expect that message would come from a higher power like the government who would have those advisors.

(Wales, Female, 34, Medium Engagement)

But the responsibility was not an equal one. The primary blame was assigned to big corporations, especially those operating in the energy and aviation sectors.

When discussed in abstract terms, cynicism was expressed about the role of big brands, especially the role they claimed to play in advertising and brand communication. These claims were often attributed to 'box ticking', 'greenwashing' and 'virtue signalling'.

The role of the individual in fighting climate change

There was strong consensus that everyone had a role to play. Most claimed they were indeed 'doing their bit'. The feeling was that if everyone did their fair share then real progress was possible.

There was a degree of defensiveness expressed when talking about personally doing more – asserting the suggestion that moral responsibility lay with the businesses that created the problem, and influence over them lay with governments and international bodies, such as the UN.

The range/scope of individual contributions depended on levels of engagement and is explored below.

Despite very different individual effort levels described, most use the phrase 'doing their bit'. Ironically, it tended to be the most engaged and most active who were most critical of the scale of their personal contribution, and this seemed to reflect greater understanding of the scale of the challenge and the urgency required.

I do my bit, all the recycling ... there are three bins now!

(Wales, Female, 63, Low Engagement)

In the overall scale of things, I know I don't do enough.

(Wales, Female, 30, High Engagement)

All of us are responsible. Anyone who travels, drives a car, throws rubbish out, recycles, washing, heating, electricity. All our little actions have a big impact. Everyone has a part to play to make the situation better.

(Northern Ireland, Female, 17, Medium Engagement)

The degree of engagement in the environment was of course dependent on individual personality and life experience. However, there did seem to be some common factors that influenced engagement levels, namely:

- **Political beliefs:** Those with more progressive beliefs tended to be more engaged.
- **Age:** Younger people were more likely to be engaged.
- **Levels of education:** Those with a higher education were more likely to be engaged.
- **Parental status and the age of children:** Parents may have received some education from their children, but also felt a greater sense of future focus that came with raising a child.

The scale and nature of individual contributions

The extent and nature of environmental action taken by participants was largely dependent on engagement levels. Three main activities emerged:

- **Action that was undertaken in the home**

This was mainly recycling and collecting food waste and was the most common activity that was defined as environmental in nature. It was an activity the vast majority of participants were engaged in. Some undertook the task on a daily basis, others, engaging weekly, prior to waste collection. The only exceptions were younger participants who still lived at home – in these situations the primary responsibility (of sorting waste into appropriate boxes and placing outside for collection) was seen to lie with their parents. However, these younger participants played a secondary role in the activity, for example, by helping to place material into the relevant boxes during the week.

Even though this was an activity required by local authorities, the activity was not seen as mere compliance and there was a degree of pride in the activity – given the time and effort invested.

- **Consumer action**

Factoring in environmental impact into purchase choices was another fairly common environmental activity. Many participants viewed purchasing an environmentally friendly product to be a legitimate form of ‘doing their bit’ to help the environment. However, there was a strong association between ‘green’ products and expense, which limited the scale of this behaviour and tended to exclude low engaged participants.

There is more detail on shopping behaviours later in the report.

I do feel myself quite drawn to companies that have a sustainable or eco message
(England, Female, 54, Low Engagement)

- **Life activism**

For some of the highest engaged participants, the environment played a much greater and broader role in their lives. They were much more knowledgeable about the subject and prided themselves on considering the environmental impact across their whole lifestyle – including diet, travel and purchases. They were also the most cynical about corporate environmental claims around offsetting and other activity. Vegans and vegetarians were more likely to be included in this segment.

I am passionate about it ... I know you have to think about it holistically ... how you personally live your life.
(England, Male 22, High Engagement)

Environmentally conscious behaviour came with a cost

There was an expectation that environmentally conscious behaviour involved some sort of sacrifice. For green disposal activity this translated into an investment of time. There was also the initial investment of learning the sorting system. This investment was not insignificant, especially for some older participants and in those areas where the process was more exacting – for example, in Wales where they used a five-box system.

In terms of consumer action, the starting point was what could be afforded, not what was required by the crisis. Most assumed doing the right thing environmentally costs more, either in time (preparation, research) or money. For most, financial cost is the predominant deterrent – ‘it all depends on price’ was a frequent response to any question of purchasing products claiming or assumed to be ‘green’. This attitude is consistent across the sample, with the exception only of the highest engaged. The idea of paying more, for more environmentally-friendly products, was seen as even more unlikely in current, straitened times. Responsibility therefore is seen to come with financial capacity. These products were seen as for the ‘well off’, and it was their duty to pay the premium.

In one sense the environmental claims can work against the likelihood of purchase. The belief that environmentally-friendly products come with a price premium, is so ingrained, that it seemed that some do not confirm this hypothesis by actually checking prices.

Unfortunately, with being on maternity leave at the minute, it is about what we can afford to do.

(England, Female, 34, High Engagement)

Who shops at Waitrose? We don't shop at Waitrose ... only the rich shop there. It's good but it wouldn't affect me because I don't shop there. It's too expensive.

(Northern Ireland, Female, 52, High Engagement)

We need to weigh the benefits and the cost as well ... I would like to have a healthier option, but if the healthier option is almond milk ... it's more expensive.

(Scotland, Female, 34, Medium Engagement)

3.2. Overall attitudes to environmental claims and terminology in advertising

Section 5 explores reactions to ads featuring specific green disposal claims in more detail. However, some findings are true across both modules covered in the research and relate to environmental messaging in general.

Most participants accepted claims made in advertising as true. There was little criticism and/or scrutiny of brands making environmental claims and an assumption that these claims were verified before they could be broadcast/published.

Uncritical acceptance of advertising claims is the norm

There was a tendency for environmental advertising claims and use of terminology to be accepted at face value. When participants were pressed on this, they were able to rationalise it. There was a common background assumption that an approval process of some sort existed that assessed ads. There was little knowledge or interest in who this body might be, or the procedures involved. When they were asked to think about it, some guessed it may be the ASA.

I know our marketing is very strictly regulated so I assume there are agreed definitions?

(England, Male 22, High Engagement)

I feel like if a brand says organic or sustainable, I'd believe them. They probably did have to prove it.

(Northern Ireland, 17, Medium Engagement)

This assumption seemed stronger if the advertising included statistics or facts or more technical-sounding terms (e.g., biodegradable).

There was also some belief that larger brands may be more risk averse and more protective/invested in their corporate reputation as well as being more likely to be subject to public scrutiny (e.g., via social media).

I would assume big companies would have to be more specific in what they are saying.

(England, Female, 34, Low Engagement)

I think it needs to meet a certain threshold or criteria to be classed as sustainable, but I wouldn't know what that criteria would be.

(Wales, Female, 35, Medium Engagement)

However, others argued larger brands would be better equipped to find loopholes to avoid getting in trouble/facing legal repercussions.

There was more trust expressed in smaller brands – and they were often assumed to be more genuine in their claims. Being eco-friendly was seen as much more central to their whole ethos/identity – not in any sense a bolt-on.

Brands are smart. They do their research to work out what they can say and have professionals who ensure they stay within the limits of the law.

(Scotland, Male, 52, Low Engagement)

When questioned, it became clear that fewer checks/certification was assumed for implicit claims, like 'good for the planet' or indeed advertising that was more light-hearted in tone.

Overall, the cynicism expressed when talking about brands in general was not often translated in the responses into individual ads. A minority were more questioning of claims, including:

- **The more environmentally engaged**

These people were genuinely interested in the issues raised by the advertising. Unlike others they didn't simply want to ignore and carry on in 'blissful ignorance'. They tended to be much more knowledgeable of the science of environmentalism. They were also more sensitive to any 'greenwashing' in the ads that were shown to them. While the lower and medium engaged participants would often rather not know about any potential dishonesty or exaggeration, some of the higher engaged participants seemed motivated to identify lapses.

- **General business sceptics**

This minority were less motivated by environmentalism than a general cynicism about big corporations and their motivations – and this included any misleading environmental claims.

- **Vegans and vegetarians**

These participants were used to approaching claims with greater scrutiny, such as reading the 'small print' to check for meat or dairy products, and this had become part of how they engaged with the world.

If you are Vegan you get used to having to be sceptical and look into everything.
(Northern Ireland, Female, 52, High Engagement)

4. Approaches to green disposal management

Green disposal management was perceived as a manageable way for consumers to ‘do their bit’ for the environment – though it was mainly engaged with at the point of disposal, rather than the point of purchase and, for most, only if the requirements for disposal felt convenient.

Across the sample, there was an acceptance that waste management was key to limiting individual environmental impact – particularly when thinking about recycling. Managing waste feels baked into everyday life, evidenced by widespread presence and use of recycling bins, limitations on plastic bag and plastic straw use, as well as standardised and free services provided by local authorities (e.g., recycling bags, food waste bins).

For most, green disposal management was seen as a relatively straightforward way for consumers to take responsibility for their environmental impact with minimal lifestyle changes required (i.e., they just need to throw it in the ‘right bin’ and the rest is taken care of). The exception to this was older people who felt they had made relatively large lifestyle changes to become ‘good’ at managing their waste – though this was a source of pride, not resentment.

As a result, engagement with green disposal management and associated terms (e.g., recyclable, recycled, biodegradable and compostable) was primarily limited to the point of disposal.

Consumers rarely gave strong consideration to waste disposal at point of purchase or when engaging with advertising, in part due to unqualified assumptions of disposal requirements and ease (i.e., consumers frequently assumed certain packaging, such as cardboard, would be able to go in home recycling bins, regardless of explicit claims made). Many also assumed businesses would make the most ethical choices possible regarding the choice of materials used, within the confines of product requirements, so that items would avoid having to be (unnecessarily) disposed of in landfill.

This did not diminish the importance of a product advertised as recyclable, recycled, biodegradable or compostable to be qualified as such, but rather, participants’ prior assumptions made them more likely to disengage with and/or overlook requirements around disposal at the point of purchase.

Beyond this, it was generally felt that consumer responsibility is relinquished at the point of disposal. Participants adopted a ‘see no evil stance’, believing that if a product is thrown in the ‘right bin’, an undefined ‘upstream power’ (though some pointed to local authorities as being responsible) would take care of the technical processes to dispose of products properly and ethically.

By disposing of it, I assume it wouldn’t have a negative impact on the environment.
(England, Female, 54, Low engagement)

There were limits around how far consumers were willing to go and this was dictated by perceived convenience. Environmental efforts were often one-dimensional and limited to 'the home' which functioned as a physical and mental boundary to 'doing their bit'. Responsibility for waste management at home felt manageable, convenient and controllable, and for some, was a source of pride in the systems they had put in place in the home (e.g., multiple bins, compost heaps etc.). This was particularly true for parents who also felt they were responsible for instilling good habits in their children.

I try when we can. I think, having young kids as well, it's so important to teach them about the environment.

(England, Female, 34, High engagement)

This sense of responsibility weakened where disposal no longer felt convenient. For example, there was resistance when a product required consumers to travel further afield and step outside of 'the home' to dispose of it properly, such as in the Purina ad¹¹ which asked customers to take cat food pouches to a supermarket recycling drop off point. This sentiment is echoed across all non-home disposal options. Journeys to a local tip or council compost site could feel unnecessarily burdensome on consumers, which further bred cynicism toward non-landfill disposal processes.

Likewise, it was less appealing and therefore less motivating when disposal processes felt unhygienic or 'messy', such as with empty cat food pouches. Some also recoiled from using food waste bins which were threatened by risks of foxes raiding them and leaving the homeowner with an unpleasant morning clean-up task!

Beyond this, placing additional parameters around how to dispose of a product was felt to compromise the perceived simplicity of the process. This tended to lead to two main outcomes:

- **Anger:** for example, the Purple Planet Packaging ad²⁶ highlighted to some participants that they had been contaminating their recycling by throwing regular takeaway pizza boxes into recycling bins.
- **Disengagement:** for example, Nestle's Kit Kat ad¹⁵ requiring customers to take packaging to a specific drop off point felt overly complicated and unnecessary.

For some participants, the impact of additional parameters actually led to negativity towards the brand behind the advertising. It was almost as if there was an unspoken agreement that manufacturers did their bit (making items seamlessly disposable) and the consumer did theirs (home disposal).

It felt unfair and unrealistic to expect the consumer to 'go the extra mile' and amounted to the brand 'not doing their bit', leaving the burden on the customer. This frustration was much more pronounced if the requirement was not clearly (and loudly) communicated.

However, there were a small number of more engaged participants who were not discouraged by the extra effort required. These consumers had experiences of saving up coffee pods to take to collection points, or crisp packets and film lids to take to supermarket points. It was however a relatively rare occurrence.

There is strong faith in the green disposal management process

There was little scepticism expressed around the green disposal management process. Most consumers presumed disposal processes were efficient and worked smoothly:

- Recycling processes were cyclical and always work properly from start to end.
- Compostable products break down fully into natural (and even usable) products such as soil.
- Biodegradable products break down or vanish completely and naturally without any human or technical intervention.

As a result, green disposal management was a source of satisfaction for the majority. It was a hassle at the start but one that had transitioned into habit. They did their bit and the system worked. For some older participants the adjustment had been quite a challenge, especially in more exacting locations such as Wales. This perception of greater effort often led to a greater sense of contribution and consequent pride.

For the more engaged, there were some concerns that the process was more complex. For some this was grounded in a concern that they may not be ‘doing it right’ (e.g., putting things in the wrong bin), or that others may not be ‘doing it right’ (and as a result contaminating all the waste on their street).

For others, it came down to concerns it was a fiddly and time-consuming process if done properly (e.g., separating out materials) or from noticing specific symbols on products which they presume have more complex meanings (e.g., recycling symbols). For a small few, scepticism was grounded in wider mistrust in the ethics of big businesses and local authorities – e.g., a suspicion that local authorities may be cutting corners in the process to save on cost.

If you do one thing wrong, they just won't lift it. You have to be very organised. No food waste in the black bin etc. It's definitely a good thing to get into the habit.

(Northern Ireland, Male, 25, High engagement)

There are two broad ‘camps’ when it comes to attitudes toward green disposal management – though both ultimately possess an ‘every little helps’ mentality and find anything that runs counter to this somewhat jarring.

Attitudes toward green disposal management fall onto a spectrum from low to high engagement, including those who are:

- Less engaged, labelled the ‘*Do-enoughers*’. These people generally throw something away and hope it goes to the right place, fully adopting the ‘see no evil’ stance. They choose not to engage with the detailed process beyond this.
- More engaged, labelled the ‘*Go-beyonders*’. These people take more pride over managing their waste, taking the extra time to sort products into different bins and separating materials out. They are also more nervous about things going wrong – for example, if they contaminate the recycling with food produce and are more likely to be critical of others around them (e.g., neighbours not making the effort).

It makes me feel good. I always look out for the recycling symbol.

(Northern Ireland, Female, 52, High engagement)

Despite this, both ‘camps’ felt good about their contribution and felt they were playing their part. It was not seen as mere compliance, but a real contribution.

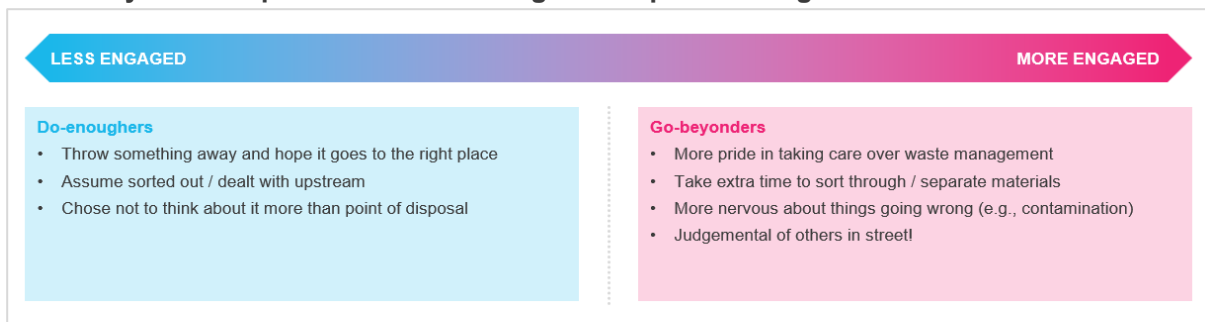
I like to think what we do is right, and we are helping. But there are so many different factors, we don't really know what happens behind closed doors, and what people are doing to the environment ... and the cost behind it. But I like to think that everyone is doing their part, when possible.

(England, Female, 34, High engagement)

Figure 1 summarises the behaviours of each ‘camp’. Please note that this is based on qualitative analysis so therefore should not be understood as nationally representative.

Figure 1.

Potentially two ‘camps’ when it comes to green disposal management



5. Green disposal terms in advertising context

5.1. Engagement with green disposal terms in advertising

Use of green disposal terms in advertising seemed like a good idea in theory and most participants presumed all terms used were wholly positive for the environment, and brands were using them accurately. Learning otherwise was jarring.

Most participants engaged with green disposal terms at the point of disposal rather than point of purchase. As a result, most did not consciously think about the meaning or role of terms in advertising without prompting.

There was a general assumption that responsible disposal was possible from the home – and this applied across recycling, composting and the disposal of biodegradable materials. The use of these words in advertising then was assumed to imply home disposal unless clearly stated otherwise. There was a general sense that if environmentally conscious disposal meant activities outside the home, then not only should this be made clear, but the onus lay with government/business to make these services as accessible and convenient as possible.

Taken at face value, participants felt the claims were encouraging and positive, reflecting a broader societal commitment to tackling climate change. The danger here could be that the terms provided a misleading sense ‘the issue was being dealt with’ without requiring consumers to engage with the complexities. Many were happy to accept ‘good news’.

[Roar Coffee Pods] I really like what it looks like. It really speaks to me personally. It is definitely something that I would be interested in buying. I feel like I trust it.

(Wales, Female, 51, Low Engagement)

There was also a general, blind acceptance of advertiser claims. For green disposal specifically, there is a danger this could add to the potentially oversimplified understanding of the terms and the disposal process in general. For example, GoHenry’s social media ad²² which states their new cards are biodegradable without any further explanation, even led some participants to presume they could leave the card out on a windowsill, and it would decompose naturally.

There was particular faith expressed in smaller, lesser-known brands, often assumed to manifest a genuine environmental ethos and therefore green disposal claims were more likely to be true (e.g., Colorful Standard sunglasses ad²¹).

I would assume the majority of their products are plant-based or at least sustainable. I might have a look to see what other things they did besides sunglasses.

(England, Female, 34, Low engagement)

The main thing that I get from this is they're trying. They're actually spending money to go out and collect all this plastic waste that we as consumers and companies have dumped. And it's really nice to see a big company doing what they can to help the environment.

(England, Male, 47, High Engagement)

5.2. Spontaneous understanding of individual terms

The terms recyclable and recycled were the most familiar and easy to describe. Compostable and biodegradable were less well understood and meanings were often conflated. Participants felt misled when they learned more of the complexity surrounding these terms, particularly on hearing the definition of biodegradable.

Claims including the terms recyclable and recycling felt most familiar and easy to understand. Participants also found it instinctively easy to distinguish between recyclable and recycled, and most felt able to provide a definition for each.

Some participants felt brands already engaged with these terms as standard, and presumed most packaging and products were created to be recyclable 'these days'. This belief could partly contribute to why use of green disposal terms like these was not considered a driver of purchase, but rather engaged with after the fact, at the point of disposal.

However, participants struggled to engage with the detail, and there was low awareness of, and interest in, the stages of the recycling process. Most participants saw this as the responsibility of 'upstream powers' and it was therefore out of their remit.

I'm not sure of the process but somebody takes away your rubbish and turns it into something new. I'm not entirely sure how they do it, but they take it away, they do something to it and it comes back as something else.

(England, Female, 34, Low engagement)

Me personally, I thought that when you put waste in the recycling, they have a system where it sorts out the different types of plastics that need to be sent to different companies and centres ... I try my hardest to try and reduce environmental waste, but if it's not in our power to be able to make that happen, it's for the companies and government to make sure it gets recycled properly.

(England, Male, 47, High Engagement)

Some participants assumed all food packaging could be recycled if it was 'rinsed out' (though what 'rinsed out' meant for 'Do-enoughers' differed from 'Go-beyonders', who took extra care). Some assumed that recyclable products could be indefinitely reused or repurposed – but most had never given the matter any thought.

There was greater uncertainty around the terms biodegradable and compostable - the two were often conflated. Taken at face-value, most assumed both processes were 'natural' and 'benign' and meant consumers could leave products to 'decompose naturally'.

[Biodegradable] is something that breaks down over time, doesn't take long. Will be organic I suppose. It breaks down I think easily. It will definitely be a quicker timeframe than compostable. I think of food waste or compost heap.

(England, Male, 49, Medium Engagement)

Participants found it difficult to define each term individually and distinguish them from each other.

Some participants believed compostable products could result in 'usable' outcomes (e.g., soil), whereas biodegradable implied the product would vanish altogether.

Some participants had an awareness of compostability, often referencing home compost bins and heaps. These participants were generally more engaged and had an awareness of the parameters and limits around home composting, including only being able to put certain products in home compost (e.g., fruit/veg peel, coffee grounds) – although that didn't necessarily mean they were able to explain the rationale behind it.

Biodegradable was hardest to define, with participants often leaning on generalised assumptions as a reference point rather than first-hand experiences. For example, linking the idea of apple cores biodegrading naturally if thrown into a field, to a belief that biodegradable products (such as the GoHenry credit card ad²²) would biodegrade in the same way.

[GoHenry credit card] Could I go and bury it in the garden? I don't know. I'd probably sit it outside, maybe on the windowsill to see if anything happens with the weather elements or something? I don't know...

(Northern Ireland, Female, 50, Low engagement)

The key differences in comprehension seemed determined by familiarity with the action. Recycling was considered the mainstream and something participants engaged with every day, so associated terms felt familiar. Compostable felt less ordinary and some saw it as reserved for more affluent people (e.g., those with outdoor space for compost heaps) so it was more difficult to describe. Biodegradation was not something participants engaged with day-to-day, so it felt much harder to grasp.

It is worth noting that a small minority of 'Go-Beyonders' had a clearer understanding of all terms and could explain and distinguish between them with greater confidence.

Figure 2 provides an overview of where the terms are placed on a spectrum of understanding and awareness.

Figure 2.
An overview of the understanding of terms



5.3. Responses to definitions of green disposal terminology

This section sets out the findings that emerged when participants were shown definitions of each of the terms and encouraged to think more deeply about each of them (see Appendix 7.3 for the full definitions shown to participants).

Participants' views toward brands using the terms recyclable and recycled did not change significantly when shown the definition. However, understanding the complexities behind the terms compostable and biodegradable provoked stronger reactions of surprise, confusion, frustration and, in some cases, anger, with some participants concerned that, without further qualification, they were potentially misleading.

Recyclable/Recycled

Sharing of definitions for these terms did not, given their widespread use, evoke any significant change in attitudes towards the term being used in advertising. Understanding the detail led participants to see the **disposal location** as one of the most important factors to be explained when a product is described as 'recyclable' (i.e., will they be able to recycle it at home, or do they have to take it to another location).

They need to actually specify what type of plastic can be recycled and where. They need to provide that in every town or village I suppose.

(Northern Ireland, Female, 50, Low engagement)

Some felt other additional details were interesting (e.g., the number of times something can be recycled), but non-essential to understanding or use of the term in the context of advertising, as participants saw these facts as inconsequential to whether or not they recycle.

For some ‘*Do-enoughers*’, it was concerning to learn about the potential for contamination of recycling with the addition of non-recyclable plastics or compostable items, as this was not something they were aware of.

Compostable

This was still viewed as a wholly positive term after being shown the definition, though there was greater caution around its use in advertising without further qualifications. In particular, participants were reassured to learn there were defined timescales for when a product is described as compostable in ads, particularly when compared with the definition for biodegradable.

‘*Go-beyonders*’ were also alarmed to learn about the potential for ‘contamination’ of recycling by non-recyclable products, such as compostable plastics. The word suggested the potential for broader damage due to an unintentional and seemingly minor mistake. It was not necessarily clear what the nature or scale of the consequences would be, and this added to the somewhat menacing feeling around the word.

I think the contaminating recycling needs to be shouted about, needs to be really clear. It only takes that one contaminated recycling bin before the whole lot has to go to landfill anyway.

(England, Female, 34, High Engagement)

Now I'm thinking, oh my god, how many things have I not disposed properly... which makes me feel less trusting of the word as a selling tool.

(England, Female, 54, Low engagement)

Participants felt understanding the **product composition** (i.e., what parts of the product were or were not compostable) and **disposal location** (i.e., where it needed to be disposed of) were the most important and relevant pieces of information to be specified when brands used ‘compostable’ in their ads.

Crucially, if the disposal location requires very specific conditions or sites, many felt the use of the term could be misleading, without relevant qualification. For example, the phrase ‘compostable plastics’ was felt misleading given the very specific, specialist and additional requirements needed to achieve the environmentally friendly outcome.

Biodegradable

The definition provoked the strongest emotional reaction from participants, most often resulting in surprise, anger and/or frustration. In the light of this definition, most felt that usage without additional qualification or elaboration was misleading, even dishonest.

That is bad ... no meaning unless specific about timing ... false advertising otherwise ... blows my mind ... they have to be transparent.

(England, Female, 54, Medium engagement)

It doesn't make me feel any more confident that that product will break down. Anything will break down eventually, it might just take a long time to do so.

(England, Male, 47, High Engagement)

The two details participants reacted strongest to included:

- **Unlimited timeframe:** participants felt that the suggestion that any product could be described as biodegradable, if there was no timeframe, undermined any meaningful positive environmental impact assigned to the product. There was a sense that this could cause more harm than good, misleading consumers to feel they have 'done their bit'.
- **Potential for toxin creation:** participants were alarmed to learn of the potential for harmful toxins to be created at the end of biodegradation. Many felt this was contradictory to the positive environmental associations of the term 'biodegradable'. Its use in ads without additional qualification felt misleading and risked undermining the value of the concept altogether.

Oh my god, that's bad. So, it's really a catch all term that anybody can use that has no meaning unless they're specific about timing. I did not know that. That's really blown my mind.

(England, Female, 54, Low Engagement)

There were widespread calls for stronger transparency about the length of time a product takes to biodegrade, as well as specific disposal risks (e.g., will it produce micro-plastics).

Some argued the word should not be used at all if the product took an extensive amount of time to biodegrade and some participants wanted ads and packaging to include a clearer indication of how long a product takes to biodegrade.

5.4. Impact of claims used in advertising context

Exposure to definitions of green disposal claims led to a variety of reactions from participants, ranging from surprise and disbelief to frustration and sense of validated scepticism. Almost all participants felt there should be stronger rules around the use of the terms in advertising, though there is a warning around the potential risk of disillusionment that could come with increased knowledge.

Exposure to the definitions led to a number of impacts, both at brand reputation and consumer attitude levels.

5.4.1. Brand reputation

Lesser-known brands making claims using the terms recyclable, recycled, biodegradable and compostable were perceived as more genuine than larger global conglomerates, even after seeing the definitions.

Where a smaller, lesser-known brand made a claim, participants assumed the brand encompassed the environment into their whole ethos. Most participants assumed these brands would be producing only environmentally friendly products (e.g. LND²⁰), and more engaged participants assumed the brand would account for the environment throughout the production process.

As a result, smaller brands were seen as more trustworthy in term usage and even after exposure to the definitions, most participants continued to believe the claims made.

[Colorful Standard] ... If you're going to make a bold statement like that, you have people that will look into it. You're setting yourself up for a fault if you're lying. Especially for a business that is less established because you're shooting yourself in the foot before you've even begun.

(England, Female, 34, Low engagement)

There was generally more scepticism around larger, well-known brands once shown the definition. Some participants felt these brands were 'jumping on the band wagon'. This created frustration as many believed big corporations possessed the power to make real change to the environment if they really wanted to.

Makes me feel these words are bandied about without full context...Makes me feel less trusting.

(England, Female, 55, Medium Engagement)

Unfair responsibility placed on consumer

There was some feeling that using the definitions whilst placing the primary burden for fulfilment on the consumer was a little disingenuous. For example, the Purina ad¹¹ advertised recyclable cat food pouches, but effective disposal required the consumer to take them to a dedicated supermarket drop off point. Even though this did not invalidate the literal meaning of the claim, it did diminish the role of the brand.

To give you another example, the Tassimo coffee pods. I have a Tassimo machine and those pods are supposedly recyclable. If you order from the actual company, they give you the recyclable bags, but where I live, they don't do that here. That's an example of 'yes, it's recyclable but they don't do that in your area'.

(Northern Ireland, Female, 50, Low engagement)

'Greenwashing'

A small number of participants directly called brands out for 'greenwashing' after learning of the definitions of the terms.

This particularly related to brands using the term biodegradable where participants felt theoretically anything could be labelled as such given the unlimited timescale explained in the definition.

The Easigrass ad⁹ was identified as an example of 'greenwashing'. Participants felt it was misleading the consumer by describing the product as recyclable and helping with water scarcity given it was a highly artificial product which they assume would require extensive, industrial level recycling treatment for the claim to remain true.

5.4.2. Consumer attitudes

Calls for increased regulation

Exposure to the definitions highlighted and strengthened calls for scrutiny around these terms in advertising. This was felt to be especially important for ads using the terms compostable and biodegradable. Participants felt regulation was required to ensure they were not used without relevant and clear qualification.

Given their complexity, there was a sense that brands should consider taking a holistic approach to qualifying and elaborating on these terms, including on packaging, in ads and on their websites.

Tell me how to dispose of the product properly. Give clear and specific information for getting rid of the product, and which parts can or cannot be disposed of in an eco-friendly way.

(Northern Ireland, Female, 50, Low engagement)

Everything should be very clear – particularly with terms where you need to dispose of something to avoid contaminating recycling and ruining the entire process.

(Northern Ireland, Male, 34, High Engagement)

Risk of disengagement

It became clear in discussion that there was a risk that increased knowledge about the complexity and ambivalence of these terms could have potentially important negative consequences. As reported earlier, participants felt they were 'doing their bit' through their disposal behaviour and this could create a sense of satisfaction, even pride. Learning that they may have been doing things wrong and/or the processes were much more complex than originally thought, was felt to have the potential to risk switching people off altogether.

It therefore felt important that any additional information that was provided needed to strike the right balance in explaining the complexities whilst maintaining a sense of personal contribution.

Case studies set out in Appendix 7.1 provide examples of these findings in the context of specific ads used as stimulus in the research.

6. Conclusions

Showing definitions to participants revealed the complexity of the terms, and evoked emotive responses particularly when learning some could even have negative impacts (e.g., biodegradable). Using the terms without further explanation could therefore be considered irresponsible and even (for some) 'false advertising'.

Participants called for greater explanation of all terms to support consumers to act in a way that is positive for the environment. They felt advertising has a key part to play in providing this explanation. Some suggested ways of doing so included:

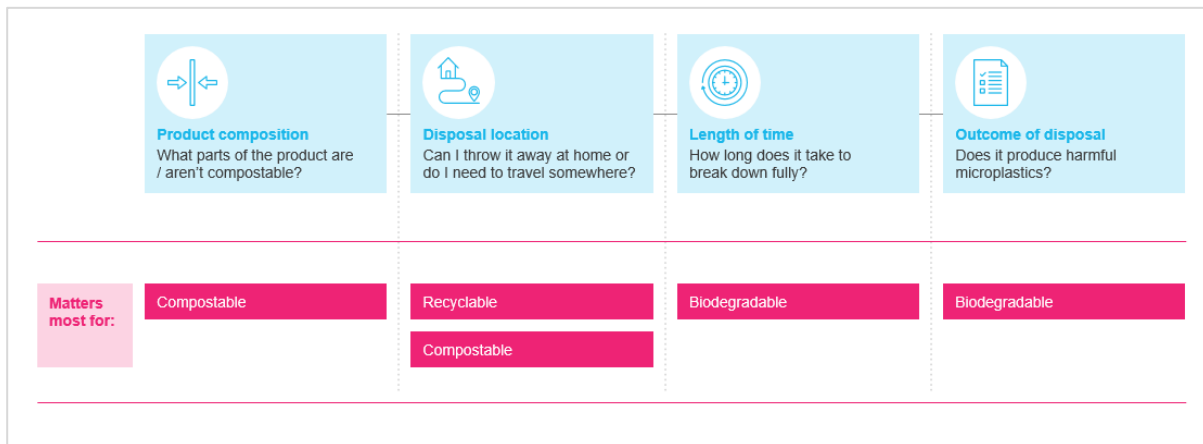
- Brands being required to use more specific wording and labels as a proxy for consumers to understand there are more complex parameters. For example, using terms such as 'home compostable', 'industrially compostable' and 'naturally biodegradable'.
- Tightening the definitions of recyclable, compostable and biodegradable. This included setting a defined timeframe for brands using the word 'biodegradable'.
- Creating and adding scales and grades to products using these terms to support consumer understanding. For example, 'Biodegradable 1' meaning the product could break down within five years; 'Biodegradable 2' meaning the product could break down in five to ten years. Some of the 'Go-beyonders', felt this suggestion would need to be accompanied by a public education campaign to avoid confusing consumers further.

Participants desired more information in four key areas when it comes to green disposal, without which, the accuracy of claims were felt to be undermined:

- **Product composition:** participants wanted to have clearer information explaining which parts of the product were or were not recyclable, compostable or biodegradable. This felt particularly important for avoiding contamination (a perceived risk to consumers 'doing the right thing').
- **Disposal location:** participants wanted to know where the product can and should be disposed of. This felt important for empowering the consumer to take the right action. Products which could be properly disposed of at home felt more appealing and powerful than if a product required extensive travel (e.g., due to poor facilities in participants' area or limited national facilities for the disposal of specific items).
- **Length of time:** understanding how long a product takes to break down (particularly for claims using compostable and biodegradable) felt vital for many. If a product was due to take a long period of time to break down fully, the claim felt less powerful and raised greater suspicion over how genuine the brand's environmental ethos was.
- **Outcome of disposal:** participants sought transparency around what happens at the end of the process and particularly wanted clarification about biodegradation and if there was any possibility of harmful micro-plastics being produced. Without this, there is a risk consumers could overstate the impact of their actions.

These areas were felt to be important when using green disposal terms more generally, but when explored within the context of the ads and definitions tested, some were felt to be more important than others. Figure 3 summarises the importance of each area mapped against the term used.

Figure 3.
Consumers desire more information in four key areas when it comes to green disposal claims



Some participants perceived limitations to providing additional information on advertising

Firstly, some of the ‘Do-enoughers’ felt that providing additional information about disposal location would not always work to overcome potential concerns around misleading advertising. Where participants were required to travel outside of the home to fulfil the claim made by the brand, the authenticity of the environmental claim was undermined. These participants felt it was unrealistic and unfair to rely on consumers taking additional, and perceived impractical steps, for the brand’s claim to be true.

Secondly, a small number of participants lacked trust in the rigidity of the system and processes in place in the current waste management system. There was some scepticism about whether local authorities and government were properly disposing of products once consumers had put them in the appropriate bin. These participants felt that even with additional information, consumers would be acting with a false sense of security that they were ‘doing their bit’ if the wider system did not work.

There was also a sense amongst some participants that adding a lot of additional detail to ads could impact ‘creativity’ in advertising. These participants were concerned that if adverts started to include lengthy explanations of what each term meant, and the additional parameters around it, the essence of creative and engaging advertising would be lost.

As touched on earlier in this report, there was also felt to be a risk that increased knowledge could undermine the case for ethical shopping and green disposal activity. It is therefore important to strike a balance between providing further information to empower the consumer to make the ‘right’ choice, without delegitimising action.

Consumers acknowledge the importance of reducing their environmental impact to help tackle climate change. For most, their engagement with green disposal terms is closely tied to the sense of reward they get from ‘doing their bit’. This can lead some to believe in a ‘better than nothing’ mentality.

Over-explanation of green disposal terms therefore has some associated risks which are important to be aware of, namely:

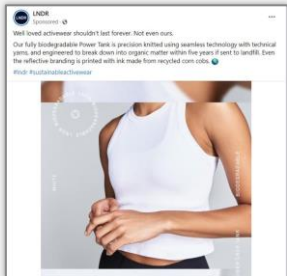
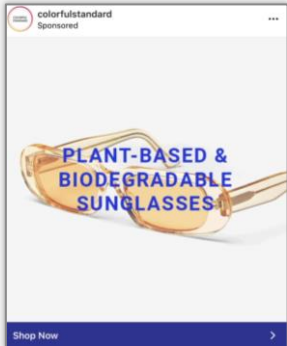
- Undermining the power of consumer action.
- Causing some to check out of environmental action altogether.
- Providing an 'out' for the sceptical and/or disengaged.

Some participants felt wider education on the terms (e.g., in the form of a public campaign) alongside more stringent requirements for advertisers to explain claims sufficiently could help to strike the right balance.

7. Appendixes

7.1. Case studies

7.1.1. LNDR²⁰ and Colorful Standard²¹: Smaller brands assumed to be more sincere in their environmental claims, but this is felt to come with a price premium


Participants generally assumed lesser-known brands were trustworthy. Where a brand had low salience, but made an environmental claim (particularly where the claim was more obscure and/or unexpected – such as a biodegradable top or sunglasses), participants assumed this reflected a broader environmental ethos, informed by the attitudes of a younger generation. It was often presumed the brands would be taking the environment into account across the range of their business. Unlike with bigger, more established companies, an environmental sensitivity was assumed to be in their DNA, not a bolt on or box-ticking exercise.

However, there was an assumption that products such as these would cost more, and the brand overall would be ‘high end’ and therefore unaffordable to many. Some questioned what real impact such brands could have given their narrow audience.

I would assume the majority of their products are plant-based or at least sustainable.
(England, Female, 34, Low Engagement)

A biodegradable top? How much are they going to charge for it? They do all this advertising for eco-friendly so I assume it will be slightly more expensive because they've sourced a better material. There is a lot more care and thought given into the product. It's probably directed to a wealthier person or family. Somebody on benefits isn't going to buy an eco-friendly top, are they?
(Scotland, Male, 52, Low Engagement)

7.1.2. Purple Planet Packaging²⁶: Risk of disengagement



The Purple Planet Packaging radio ad²⁶ came as a shock to participants. Participants were surprised and, in some cases, unhappy to learn that takeaway pizza boxes, which many had been putting in their home recycling, were not recyclable due to food residue on them. It felt disheartening to learn that efforts made to ‘do their bit’ were wasted or even harmful/wrong – and this ran in direct contradiction to the ‘every little helps’ mentality which most held.

For some, this revelation provoked strong reactions. Some even talked about ‘giving up’ on recycling efforts entirely. For these participants, there was a sense that this ad told them the effort they had gone to was not worth it, and therefore they questioned whether they should be taking the extra time or effort to engage with environmentally-friendly disposal processes at all. This demonstrated the need for additional information to be delivered in a way that did not risk alienation and disengagement.

The most engaged ‘Go-beyonders’ did, however, admire the attempt from the brand to educate – but these participants tended to be already aware of the contamination risks.

7.1.3. Purina¹¹: Perceived inconvenient disposal requirements led some to question the brand’s motivation



Reactions to the Purina ad¹¹ promoting recyclable cat food pouches demonstrated consumer resistance to waste management requirements that were ‘inconvenient’ (i.e., outside the home).

Requiring participants to take pouches to dedicated recycling points in supermarkets was seen as unrealistic. It was not only seen as an additional hassle – there was also a sense that it was distasteful and possibly unhygienic to transport empty cat food pouches.

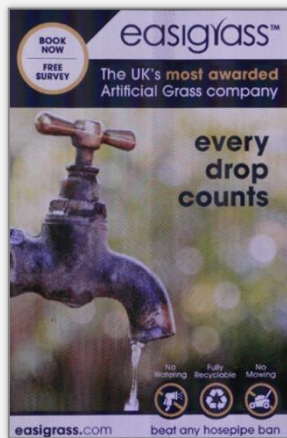
There was little indication this was something participants would be willing to do themselves, and most felt the result would be consumers disposing of cat food pouches in their regular bins or home recycling, which could risk contamination.

Some also questioned how genuine Purina’s environmental motivation really was as the burden was seen to fall disproportionately to the consumer.

If it’s a cat food pouch I’d have to store it up, wait to go to the supermarket and then take it all back then ... is there really a driver for me to take it to a supermarket? If I lived locally... possibly ... putting caveats in there, you’re getting on this greenwashing thing. It’s making yourself sound like you’re doing the right thing and being eco-friendly but you’re not.

(England, Male, 49, Medium Engagement)

7.1.4. Easigrass⁹: An example of ‘greenwashing’



The Easigrass ad⁹ for ‘fully recyclable’ artificial grass was considered an example of ‘greenwashing’ by some participants.

The product (artificial grass) felt at odds with the idea of being environmentally friendly. Because of this, participants generally assumed any environmental claims lacked credibility.

Participants perceived the ad itself to be making misleading claims in order to appear as environmentally friendly, for example:

- The idea of artificial grass as ‘recyclable’ felt meaningless given the product would likely be laid for a long period of time.
- It felt inauthentic to use saving water as a justification for producing an entirely plastic product rather than investing in real grass / something natural.

It looks to me straightaway like greenwashing. Nobody buys plastic grass for the environmental aspect do they. It's a bit of a contradiction. To have a natural material like grass manufactured in an industrial way and then to have it transported from China or somewhere. It's like saying 'let's take the whole countryside up and replace it with Easigrass so then no one has to mow the lawn'.

(England, Female, 55, Medium Engagement)

7.1.5. GoHenry²² and Colorful Standard²¹: ‘Biodegradable’ feels misleading as the term implies simple, natural disposal



The GoHenry²² credit card and Colorful Standard²¹ sunglasses ads were two examples of when participants felt misled by the term ‘biodegradable’. On first viewing, most assumed the credit card and sunglasses were wholly positive for the environment because they were advertised as biodegradable and many instinctively assumed they could be easily disposed of at home (e.g., even simply by leaving the card on the windowsill or the sunglasses on the beach to decompose).

Participants were surprised to see two products traditionally made of plastic being promoted as environmentally friendly but did not doubt the claims were true. This was primarily driven by the assumption that environmental claims made in ads were verified.

Both ads were approached with greater scepticism after participants had seen the definition of biodegradable. Participants wanted greater clarification about the product composition, and if there were parts that were not biodegradable as well as other parameters such as the potential for micro-plastics and the required disposal process.

Planting the tree makes me feel good about it. I like that it is biodegradable and derived from field corn because it's helping the environment. I believe it is biodegradable.

(Northern Ireland, Female, 52, High Engagement)

Why would they need to lie? If you're going to make a bold statement like that, you'll have people looking into it. You're just setting yourself up to be called out, especially for a business that's less well-established because you're shooting yourself in the foot.

(Northern Ireland, Female, 52, High Engagement)

From a young age, I've thought about products being biodegradable as when you can just throw it out of the car window, and it will break down naturally.

(Northern Ireland, Male, 34, High Engagement)

7.2. Stimulus table

Appendix No.	Brand	Media	Terms	Description
1	Waitrose	Social Media, website (own site)	Compostable, recyclable/ recycled	<p>An Instagram reel explaining that Waitrose is 'No 1 for reducing plastic' but stating there is 'more to do' and pledging all Waitrose own-label packaging will be, '... widely recycled, reusable or home compostable' by 2023. They also commit to continue trialling their unpacked concept.</p> <p>Content on Waitrose website explains further how they are eliminating plastic from their stores.</p>
2	Roar	Banner, website (own site)	Compostable	<p>Promotion of Roar's 'eco coffee pods' which states they are 100% compostable.</p> <p>Roar website provides further information about the home compostable coffee pods and explains that 'Labels like "compostable" and "biodegradable" are often misused ...' and that some pods '... take years to biodegrade' without the use of industrial machinery. It goes on to explain that their pods break down in 26 weeks.</p>
3	Grind	Leaflet (physical)	Compostable	<p>Promotion of Grind coffee pods advertised as '... the UK's first home compostable coffee pods ...'. Includes an image of a Grind coffee tin next to a cup of coffee with a promotional offer accessed via a QR code. Features a leaf logo with the words 'Certified Home compostable'.</p>
4	Dyper	Social media	Compostable	<p>Post by Dyper, with no imagery, explains they are running a promotion on their nappies. The ad states the nappies are '... compostable, yet perform more like conventional nappies but without TBT, phthalates, chlorine, alcohol, lotion or inks'.</p>
5	Sainsbury's	Social media	Compostable	<p>Reel of images promotes Sainsbury's own-brand tea, with a drive to make teabags compostable and plant-based by '... the end of the year' and to remove plastic wrapping from tea-bag boxes. Sainsbury's states that making this change will make '... 859 million brews compostable ...', and will help '... halve all our plastic by 2025'.</p>
6	Prestige Flowers	Website (own site)	Compostable, recyclable	<p>Text and images promoting Prestige as '... one of the UK's most sustainable florists'. They also state their 'ethical rating is 100/100'. The website explains various ways in which they are environmentally friendly (e.g., not using single-use plastics, adhering to 'fair and ethical farming practice', and supporting the wildflower campaign). 'Did-you-know?' boxes, highlight some of their practices, such as: recycling tonnes of green waste into compost; not using chemical pesticides; and supporting the Wildflower campaign to '... protect Britain's rarest little animals at risk of extinction'. It also gives readers tips on cutting their own carbon footprint.</p>

Appendix No.	Brand	Media	Terms	Description
7	Lavazza	Website (own site)	Compostable	Lavazza website promoting their 'compostable capsule' with imagery of a coffee pod with plants coming out of it. The text explains that capsules should not be thrown into home composting systems nor included in garden waste and advises checking local council facilities. Imagery of the capsule lifecycle explains they should be thrown in food waste bins for industrial composting, with capsules eventually becoming 'nourishment for the soil'. Provides options to find out more about 'Sustainability with Lavazza' as well as industrial composting and expert Q&As.
8	Co-op	Television	Compostable	<p>Two women walk into the sea on a UK beach. While swimming they discuss how they are looking forward to getting an ice-cream afterwards. One says, '... when we buy it from the Co-op, they're using those compostable bags now.' Both then say, 'Which means less plastic in the sea.'</p> <p>The ad ends with a voiceover claiming Co-op is the first national retailer to use certified compostable bags in the UK.</p>
9	Easigrass	Poster (physical)	Recycled/ recyclable	A poster with a photo of a tap with a water droplet coming out of it. The poster states 'every drop counts' and claims Easigrass is, 'The UK's most awarded Artificial Grass company'. Icons at the bottom of the poster state, 'No watering', 'Fully recyclable' and 'No mowing' with a line at the bottom saying, 'beat any hosepipe ban'.
10	Sainsbury's	Social media	Recycled/ recyclable	Sponsored image reel showing several screens featuring plastic bottles. The post encourages the reader to 'Tap to tidy'. When clicked, the bottles move out of the way to expose several pieces of information about Sainsbury's pledge to recycle coastline plastic which they claim, '... will stop nearly 12 million plastic bottles from going into the ocean every year'. The ad states, 'Better for the seas, better for the planet'.
11	Purina	Television	Recycled/ recyclable	Opens with a white cat staring into the camera. A male voice introduces 'Gourmet Mon Petite intense'. The voiceover claims it is 'Now in a recyclable pouch...'. An asterisk at the bottom of the screen throughout the advertisement states, 'Recycling points available at participating supermarkets'. A 'Recycle me' logo on the screen also reads 'Pouches recyclable at supermarkets'. Final shot shows, 'To find out how and where to recycle visit ...' with details of the advertiser's website.
12	HelloFresh	Website (own site)	Recycled/ recyclable	A page on the HelloFresh website with a mix of photos, animation and text explaining their 'Innovative Packaging'. The text covers various aspects of their packaging, including the packaging they use and why, as well as tips for the customer on how to re-use their HelloFresh box. It also includes claims such as, 'We've switched to fully recyclable and FSC* certified

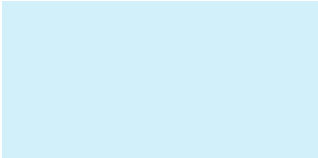
Appendix No.	Brand	Media	Terms	Description
				paper sachets ...', and its introduction of 'more recyclable packaging ...'. The ad claims 'Hello Fresh helps prevent plastic pollution'.
13	McDonald's	Radio	Recycled/ recyclable	McDonald's radio ad which includes voices from various different characters who take you through the various ways McDonald's claim to be wasting less. Voiceover states, 'Like reusing our old cooking oil to make biodiesel', someone continues, 'That helps fuel my truck.' Another character says, 'Or recycling my used McCafe cup at McDonald's', and a child continues, 'To make a Birthday card for me, thanks dad.' The voiceover states that it is part of McDonald's plan to recycle and reuse more because, 'When you change a little, you change a lot.'
14	Beverage Services Ltd (Coca Cola)	Poster (digital static image)	Recycled/ recyclable	Digital poster showing two interlocking circles. The first circle has an image of a Coca Cola bottle with the cap flipped back with the line 'Flip cap back', and the second has a photo of empty Fanta, Sprite and Coca Cola bottles with their caps flipped back and the line 'Recycle it attached'. The advertisement claims, 'Together for good. Our new caps are attached for easier collection for recycling'. A QR code at the bottom reads 'Scan to see how it works'.
15	Nestle UK Ltd (Kit Kat)	Video on Demand	Recycled/ recyclable	A re-styled version of one of Kit Kat's older, well-known ads of a photographer in a zoo with pandas. The voiceover states, 'We've recycled one of our classic ads to tell you that our new Kit Kat two-finger packaging is now made with recycled plastic and is recyclable.' The voiceover goes on to explain that 'It's one of the small steps we're taking to reduce the impact of our packaging. Take the new packs back to participating stores and recycle with other flexible plastics.' Qualifying text explains, 'The recycled content of the wrapper is allocated using ISCC mass balance approach'.
16	Pepsi Lipton	Poster (digital static image)	Recycled/ recyclable	Poster shows two enlarged Lipton Ice Tea bottles against a blue and yellow background. The ad claims, 'Deliciously refreshing, 100% recycled'. Qualifying text at the bottom states, 'Bottle made from recycled plastic, excludes cap and label'.
17	Vivid Water Ltd	Website (own site)	Recycled/ recyclable	Website promoting Vivid Water's 'Water in a box'. Ad features various Vivid water products in cardboard box packaging as well as the option to watch a video. The website claims it is 'sourced with care', uses 'responsible packaging' and is 'eco-friendly & sustainable'. The tagline is 'Better water, better world.'

Appendix No.	Brand	Media	Terms	Description
18	Huggies	Social media	Biodegradable	A social media ad shows an image of a pregnant body with a small image of Huggies baby wipes at the bottom with a label stating, 'biodegradable and plastic free'. The tagline says, 'Good for the environment'. The caption claims the '... Natural Biodegradable wipes are plastic free and made with 99% pure water. Good for the planet and for you too, baby'. There is an option to click to 'Learn More'.
19	Planera	Social media	Biodegradable	Image of a sanitary pad being dipped in a beaker of water. The text above the image reads 'More effective, just as comfortable, easier to dispose of, AND good for the environment!?!? That's right, we've designed the world's first FLUSHABLE pads'.
20	LNDR	Social media	Biodegradable	Image of a woman wearing a white sports top. The text above the image states, 'Well loved activewear shouldn't last forever. Not even ours. Our fully biodegradable Power Tank is precision knitted using seamless technology with technical yarns and engineered to break down into organic matter within five years if sent to landfill. Even the reflective branding is printed with ink made from recycled corn cobs. *world emoji*. The ad gives the option to 'Shop now'.
21	Colorful Standard	Social media	Biodegradable	Image of large plastic sunglasses on a plain white/grey background. Bold capital letter text overlays the image and claims, 'Plant-based and biodegradable sunglasses'. There is no other text on the image aside from a button which provides the option to 'Shop now'.
22	GoHenry	Social media	Biodegradable	<p>A tweet from the GoHenry twitter account features an image of two GoHenry cards. One card is purple, and one is light blue. The text states 'Two new card designs have landed with a (color) POP! They're biodegradable, derived from field corn (*corn emoji*) and we'll plant a tree after their first use (*Tree emoji*)! Check them out (*eyes emoji*)'.</p> <p>Additional information on the GoHenry site explains: 'When you want to dispose of your Eco card, all you need to do is cut out the chip and magnetic strip, chop up the card to protect your personal details, and either put it in your food waste bin for the local council to transport it to a specialist industrial composting facilities, or in your standard rubbish bin (but don't put it in with your recycling!)'.</p>
23	Nuby	Website (own site)	Biodegradable	Shopping page for Nuby baby bibs shows an image of a bib promoted as 'Biodegradable bibs'. Amongst other information, the website claims the product is 'Made from planet-friendly biodegradable material' and explains, 'This item is single use only. Dispose of the bibs after single use in household waste. Do not flush down the toilet' and that, '... the biodegradable material is kind to the environment'.

Appendix No.	Brand	Media	Terms	Description
24	Pets at Home – Dog Poop Bags	Website (own site)	Biodegradable	Shopping page for Pets at Home 'Degradable Dog Poop Bags'. The ad claims the bags '... allow you to easily and hygienically clean up after your dog ...' and that, 'Our degradable poop bags are safe, non-toxic and less harmful to the environment than standard bags'.
25	PG Tips	Television	Biodegradable	A young girl sits in her bedroom and is hosting a tea party with her soft toys. She is using PG Tips tea bags and says to her toys, 'I want to address the elephant in the room' by which she goes on to explain that 'We are all switching to PG Tips now' and tells them that '...these tea bags are biodegradable, while some still use plastic.' There is an asterisk at the bottom of the screen that reads 'Traditional oil-based plastics'. Ad ends with text on screen which asks, 'Have you made the switch?'
26	Purple Planet Packaging	Radio	Biodegradable	Radio ad with a cheery voiceover explaining that, 'Your restaurant's pizza boxes are recyclable ... until you put a pizza in them.' An alarm sound rings in the background and the voiceover shouts, 'Contamination! Not exactly Chernobyl, but the box can't now be recycled so it can't fight climate change.' The ad claims Purple Planet Packaging is plant-based and biodegradable so '... it'll soon be gone', and that they are rated 'Excellent on Trust Pilot'. The ad ends with a jingle which sings, 'Join us on a purple planet.'

7.3. Terminology definitions

Term	Description
<p>Recycled and recyclable</p>	<p>A recyclable product can be broken down into its raw materials and turned into new products or materials.</p> <p>A recycled product is one that is made, wholly or partly, from repurposed products through the process of recycling.</p> <p>Recycling products and materials means the preservation of natural resources and less pollution as fewer resources are required to make new materials, as well as less unnecessary waste (and potentially harmful materials) ending up in landfill.</p> <p>However, not all recycled products are recyclable. And not all products can be further or infinitely recycled. Aluminium, tin and glass can be recycled many times over. Some figures suggest paper and cardboard can be recycled 5–7 times. The number of times plastic can be recycled varies and some forms of plastic need to be recycled in specific facilities, not in your home recycling bin.</p>
<p>Biodegradable</p>	<p>If a product is biodegradable, it can be broken down by bacteria, fungi or other organisms and be reabsorbed by nature.</p> <p>Most things can be called biodegradable because they will eventually break down – but there are no set definitions around how long a biodegradable product can or should take to break down. A coffee cup that may take 30 years to break down and an apple which takes 1 month, could both be described as biodegradable.</p> <p>Different products require specific conditions to breakdown fully, depending on the process of biodegradation, and if biodegradable items end up in landfill, they won't be exposed to the natural conditions required to breakdown (as landfills shut out sunlight and moisture and have reduced oxygen levels).</p> <p>Some things are naturally biodegradable, like food and plants, while other items can sometimes break down into harmful by-products – for example, some forms of biodegradable plastics can break down into harmful micro-plastics, much like traditional plastics.</p>
<p>Compostable</p>	<p>If a product is compostable, it is made from materials that can break down into simpler parts, such as water, oxygen and compost.</p> <p>Unlike biodegradable products, compostable products break down into natural substances within a specific, defined time frame.</p> <p>Some products require specific conditions to be broken down properly. For example, some forms of compostable materials cannot be put into home-composters as they have been designed to break down in conditions only found in industrial or local authority composting facilities as these reach the higher temperatures and humidity needed to break down properly.</p>

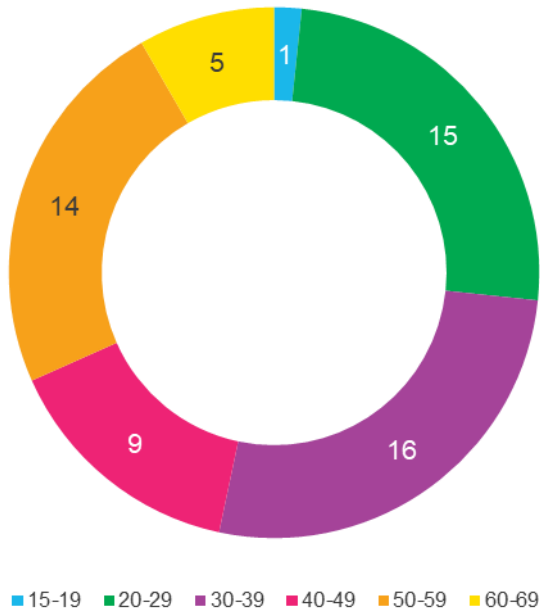


Compostable plastics only break down in certain conditions – if those conditions are not met, compostable plastics behave like regular plastic. Compostable products should not be disposed of in recycling bins as this can contaminate the recycling process.

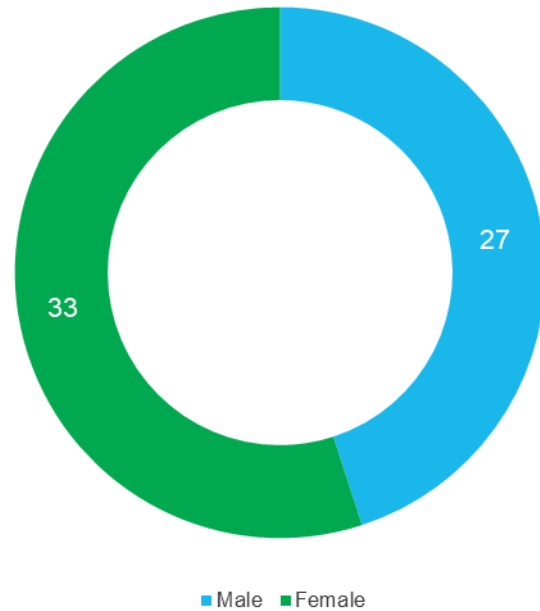
7.4. Sample breakdown

7.4.1. Full study (Modules 1 & 2)

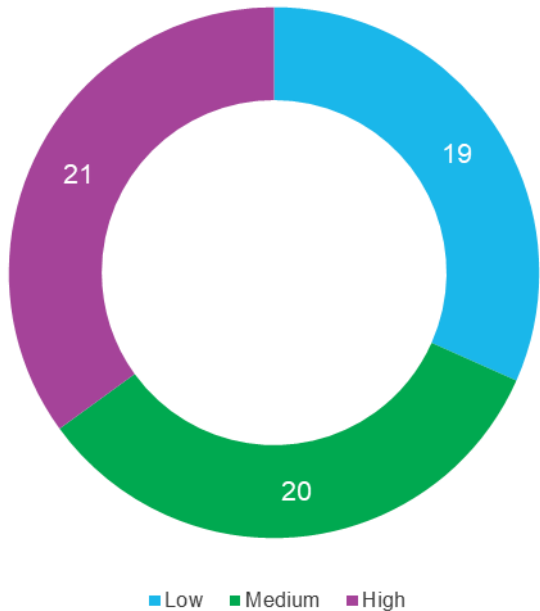
Age



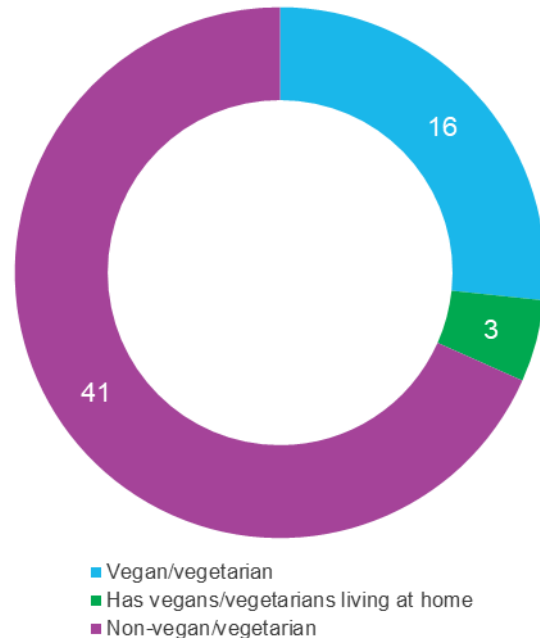
Gender



Environmental engagement



Dietary choice

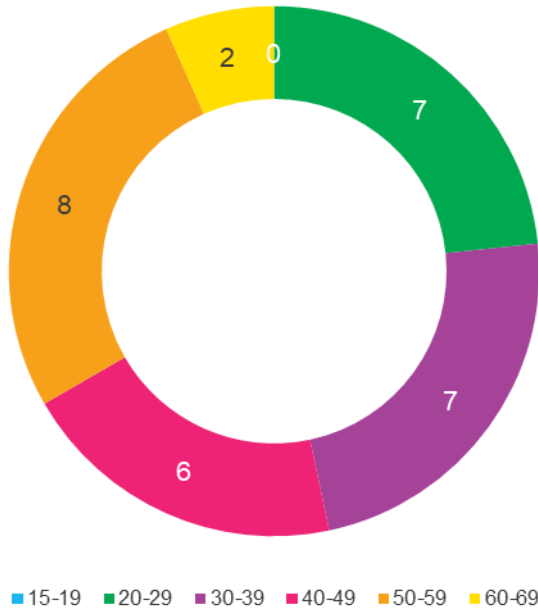


Respondents were asked their level of engagement and interest in Energy and Climate Change during the screening process – this was therefore self-defined.

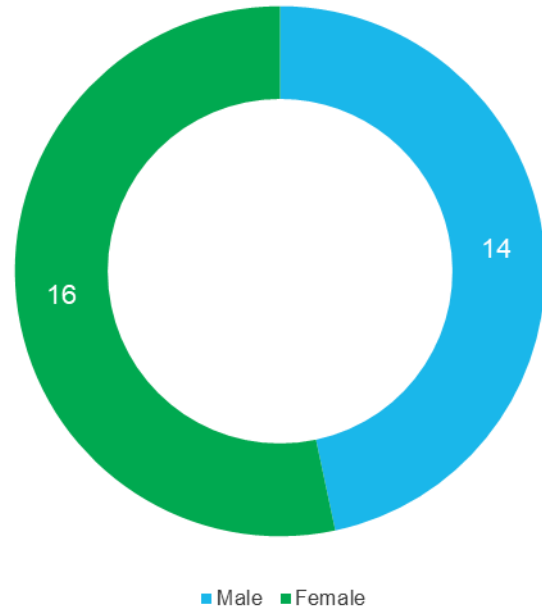
Respondents were asked their overall attitude towards food including a range of statements related to healthy eating and inclusion of animal products in their diet.

7.4.2. Green disposal claims module only

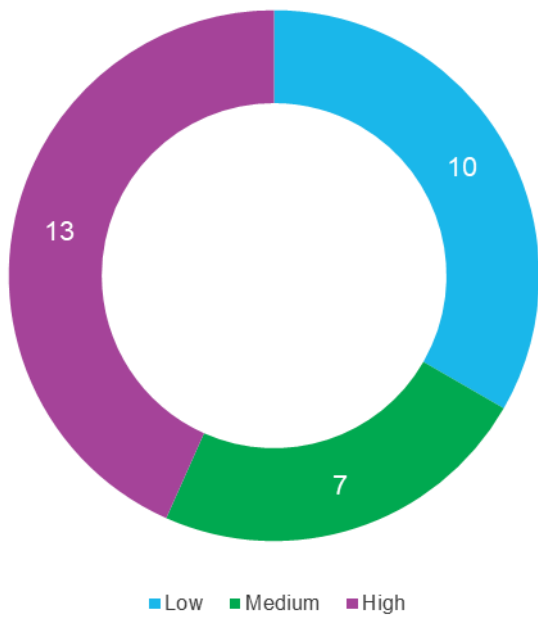
Age



Gender



Environmental engagement





THANK YOU

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