

Lettuce deceive you

A Sugar-Free Story Of Healthwashing

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The news: “Centre to formulate norms to deal with ‘healthwashing’. The move comes amidst an increasing number of companies making misleading nutritional claims on their product packages. While the intent is to safeguard consumer’s interest and public health at large, the move has brought to light a new term – ‘healthwashing’. Here’s all that you need to know.”

The basics: What exactly is health washing?

Put simply, healthwashing is nothing but a marketing ploy used by companies to make their products appear healthier than they usually are. Now, this could entail varied techniques such as suppressing the negatives about the product, or glossing over the little good the product has to make it appear like a health endowment. Recently, celebrity nutritionist Rujuta Diwekar took to her social media handle describing healthwashing as “Much like brainwashed or whitewashed, it’s the act of villainising or romanticising nutrients that the food industry indulges in to keep the profits churning.”

The delusions: What they say vs. what they mean?

Fun fact: Several sugar-free snack bars contain more sugar than a bar of Kit Kat, hiding behind several ‘Frankenstein ingredients’ that you cannot make head or tail of. And that my friend, is just the beginning of healthwashing.

It was only very recently that Indian Council of Medical Research (ICMR) made a series of striking revelations, such as ‘no-cholesterol’ and ‘heart friendly’ are being used to cloud the usage of plant-based oil, which might not have cholesterol but are 100% fat. Products claiming to have real fruit may have only 10% actual fruit pulp apart from added sugar and additives. Similarly, cereals may magnify their ‘low sugar’ content, while completely pushing under the rug ingredients like high fructose corn syrup and maltodextrin, which have adverse side effects. Roasted makhana packets tout their protein and calcium content but don’t tell you that they are ‘roasted’ in oil. Multigrain fad is another glaring example of healthwashing, which basically means nothing more than one type of grain in the ingredient list. In other words, a cracker made with three different highly-refined, fiberless grains is technically a multigrain cracker. ‘Multigrain’ has nothing to do with health, though these labels certainly suggest otherwise.

The non-profit Nutrition Advocacy in Public Interest (NAPI), which campaigns against ultra processed foods, recently raised concerns about McDonald’s India’s new multi-millet burger, citing that adding a mere handful of millets to highly processed foods is not going to make it healthier. A statement issued by NAPI stated, “The overall nutritional

Centre to soon formulate norms to deal with ‘healthwashing’

New Delhi: Centre will soon formulate guidelines to deal with ‘healthwashing’, amidst growing trend of companies making misleading health claims on product packages, such as those containing multi-grains, natural extracts, and are sugar-free or low fat. In several cases, such products cost more as people are ready to pay for health benefits. Consumer affairs secretary Brijesh Kumar said the best way to deal with the issue has come to the department’s notice, and it will start working on formulating norms to bring on board consumers do not get misled. Some of the norms include need to make honest declaration upfront about the ingredients so that people do not take undue advantage. She said guidelines for prohibiting ‘healthwashing’ and misleading advertisements by coaching centres will be released soon. The department is also carrying out a campaign of prohibition of surrogate advertisements. “Healthwashing” refers to companies or entities that have misleading claims about their products, services, or experiences, while “surrogate ads” are marketing techniques that indirectly promote brands and products, such as tobacco and alcohol, which are banned from advertising. As per law, regarding to misleading advertisements can attract a penalty of up to Rs 50 lakh and a maximum of three years in jail. The department is also working with e-commerce companies to stop selling banned and unsafe food and how states are using them to sign a “safety pledge” to stop promotion and selling of such items through their portals.



quality of the product is determined by its complete ingredient profile and the extent of processing, which is nowhere reflected in the promotional information.”

The curtains: Why is this a problem?

If public health is a concern, then healthwashing sure is a problem. And if you look at the numbers, then it is a much bigger problem than one can imagine. Nearly 62% of all the drinks available in the market are ‘dangerously’ high in sugar, and only 6% meet the guidance on ‘free sugar’. Breakfast cereals are the biggest example of healthwashing, with nearly 70% of them making some health claim; when they come loaded with copious amounts of sugar. Most consumers fall prey to these health washed claims, buying products that they perceive as ‘organic’, ‘natural’, ‘sugar-free’, ‘trans fat free’ and more, not knowing that they are jeopardising their health and wasting atrociously high amounts of money. In fact, 26% Americans admit to buying healthy foods just because they are trendy or cool. Further, it puts a bomb on the consumer’s pocket with many shelling out for the rather steeply priced ‘healthy’ products. 25% Americans reported to splurge on what they consider was ‘organic’ produce. In addition, healthwashing has also fuelled various food myths. For instance, 21% respondents of a survey stated that they believed soy milk or almond milk to be healthier than dairy milk.

The moolah: Why companies do this?

According to Avendus Capital, India’s health food market, which is growing at the world’s fastest rate of 20%, is expected to reach 30 billion USD by 2026. Global health and

wellness snack are expected to top 98 billion USD by 2025, with a compound annual growth rate of 5.4% predicted. The stakes involved are high, and capitalising on them is every company’s gain. While the health food sector was always on a boom, COVID-19 has acted as an important catalyst, spurring demand for healthy snacks. Brands are creating ‘health halos’ – an imaginary façade to tap in on this and lure customers.

The solution: What the customer needs to do?

Until the governments crack down on misleading food labels, the ball lies in the customer’s court. The consumers need to be educated to make well-informed decisions. One’s best bet could be to curtail the usage of anything that comes out of a box/bag. Stick to whole foods as fruits, vegetables, whole grain, seeds, nuts etc. Opting for foods that are particular to your climate and region is always a great way to opt for healthy food.

But that is not to say that the governments are not doing their bit. For instance, Singapore already uses easy to decipher labels like Nutri Grade mark of A, B, C, and D to inform consumers about the degrees of sugar and saturated fat content. Regulatory restrictions on unhealthy products are tightening all across Europe. The UK is spearheading new HFSS rules that impose media and promotional restrictions on ‘unhealthy’ products. On the private front, firms like Thinking Forks, a Bengaluru-based F&B consultant, has devised a Goodness Meter to help ‘honest brands’ showcase their goodness. In this accreditation process, brands submit their documents online to allow a panel of experienced food experts to vet and score various products.

