Greenwashing Practices in Company Marketing Communications

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2.1 Introduction

In June 2023, the results of a study were published (SW Research, 2023) according to which 70% of Poles declared they had a positive attitude towards advertisements with green elements, and almost half the respondents said that they contribute to people's awareness of environmental problems (49%). Twenty nine percent were familiar with the term "greenwashing" and 24% of the respondents had encountered the term "eco-consciousness." Some 63% of the respondents indicated that the companies they worked for took individual actions to be green and care for the environment (58%), while a fifth said their companies took no such actions (20%). The most often cited example (45%) of their employers taking green measures was using energy-efficient light bulbs. Thirty eight percent considered a combination of environmental and economic motives to be the primary motivation for introducing green solutions. Nearly a third of the respondents (27%) declared that they did not believe in the truthfulness of green advertising and considered it a marketing exercise.

Looking at the above survey results (SW Research, 2023), it is not surprising that the ambition of today's businesses (and individuals) is to be "green." Declarations by people and companies that they are friends of nature and care for the environment are increasingly common in the public space. It is sometimes different in practice, but the need to have a "green image" is increasingly evident in society.

The need to have a "green image" is particularly evident in how information about companies' activities is communicated. There is a growing list of words and expressions associated with green management (Jones, 2019). This makes them fashionable (buzzwords), and they are often overused or used in ways that differ from their original meaning. Only some of them are included in Figure 2.1. In practice, many more buzzwords appear in the public space to help evoke green associations (Akturan, 2018). Sometimes, they describe company's sustainable practices, but often they are just good-sounding embellishments (Ahmed et al., 2023).

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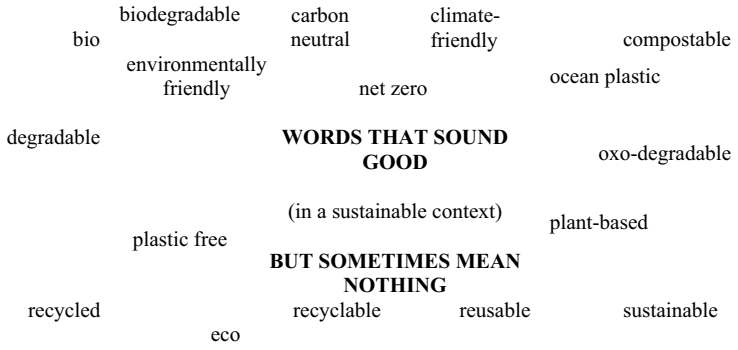

Figure 2.1 Buzzwords.
Authors' own.

An example is the word "biodegradable," which means that a substance naturally decomposes but does not specify whether it will take a month or a hundred years. A customer who sees that a product is "biodegradable" is usually not interested in these details. He simply remembers that a thing he uses is biodegradable. However, he does not know the natural decomposition process and that its characteristics depend on the composition of the decomposing substance.

Indiscriminate use and misuse of such terms are a problem for consumers who want to make sustainable market decisions but find it difficult to verify the credibility of the messages they receive. Figure 2.2 provides a list of questions that customers should ask themselves to assess whether the product they intend to use is sustainable. However, customers often lack information about the technology used to produce goods and the knowledge to evaluate them from an environmental perspective. Finding the answers to these questions requires time they cannot afford to spend.

Awareness of the risks and the problems involved in verifying doubts surrounding purchases means that accusations of greenwashing are increasingly being levelled at companies. This is a reaction to their communications regarding their environmental and sustainability activities.

We are seeing changes in market expectations of goods providers. For example, not so long ago, evaluations (by customers and industry analysts) of the activities of soft drinks producers focused on the health aspects of the drinks themselves. Nowadays, what is becoming as important to customers as product parameters is, among other things, the technological process, the working conditions of employees, and the management of waste after the

Figure 2.2 Sustainability verification.
Authors' own, based on (WWF UK, n.d.)

production and consumption of these drinks. Stakeholders are increasingly asking businesses questions about these areas of operation and expect green measures on their part (Ghitti et al., 2023). Unfortunately, they often receive answers in which everything is fine at the declarative level. However, sometimes implementation is more complicated.

The question of why it is so easy to accuse a company of greenwashing and why there are more and more accusations of this type in the public space is intriguing (Proszowska et al., 2024). Whether this is an overstated strategy or a deliberate misuse to improve the company's image and convince customers to buy its products is uncertain. One could assume that it is just a matter of not being too ambitious in good faith. After all, any market participant can be very ambitious, define goals it cannot achieve, and tell everyone about

them. On the other hand, looking at the company's entire operating strategy, sometimes it is clear that it was not a priority for the company to deliver on its promises. With a high degree of probability, one can assume that from the beginning, the company did not intend to fulfil the promises. But it is impossible to be sure.

Presumptions, interpretations, and assumptions to identify true intentions are the spaces in which accusations of greenwashing arise. This is why it is so difficult to define the concept clearly and diagnose it (Marde & Verite-Masserot, 2018). It is difficult to determine where to draw the line between naturally boasting about the best in us and cynically manipulating the public by deliberately misrepresenting a company's policies and their environmental impact (Budzanowska-Drzewiecka & Proszowska, 2023b).

2.2 The Determinants of Greenwashing in Marketing

As the world's population grows and production and consumption expand, so does the number of negatives that threaten the livelihoods of future generations (Inieke, 2021). This results in an increased awareness of the need to change the functioning of the global economy. (Fatemi et al., 2023) As awareness of the deteriorating quality of the environment becomes more widespread, more market players are taking a substantial interest in how to protect it. Increasing attention is being paid to human impacts on the state of the environment. The results of a succession of studies (Boztepe, 2013; Kamiński, 2019) show which activities damage the environment the most. There is pressure to reduce the activities that are the most harmful (Amatulli et al., 2021) to the environment and to look for opportunities to improve it.

Processes taking place in the economy are making a sustainable approach to production and consumption increasingly popular (Chakraborty et al., 2017). Sustainability and renewability are identified with the achievement of not only economic but also environmental and social goals in the context of a long-range balancing of intergenerational needs (Pabian, 2012). The expression "sustainable development" was first used in the Brundtland Report produced by the World Commission on Environment and Development (Lee & Carter, 2009, p. 97). This states that sustainable development considers the needs of the present without compromising the ability of future generations to meet these needs. Subsequent authors have added that sustainable development is about balancing the above-mentioned objectives (Grudzewski et al., 2010). According to Raczkowska et al. (2021), sustainable development is otherwise understood as the ability of an enterprise to nurture and support growth over time while effectively meeting the expectations of its various stakeholders.

For some marketers, the history of sustainable marketing began in 1982 with a publication by Naisbitt (1982). At that time, the interest of marketing in environmental issues was recognised as one of the megatrends that would

shape reality. Initially, it was thought that environmental concerns should be the responsibility of the government. Later, commercial enterprises also became involved. As interest in the subject became more widespread, individual market participants realised that caring for the environment was necessary. They began to be increasingly guided by it in their lives and to expect such action from others. Entrepreneurs noticed that customers pay attention not only to the parameters of the product they are buying but also to the image of the provider. An obvious consequence of this was a focus on pro-environmental activities in the functioning of individuals and entities which wanted to build or improve their image in the eyes of their stakeholders.

Implementing green activity was and is a costly and multi-stage process (Krn et al., 2001). Such difficulties meant that entrepreneurs could not rapidly show spectacular results in this respect. To gain recognition from their stakeholders, many reported individual environmental activities while hiding activities that, in other areas, were still damaging the environment. This made customers perceive that the company cared about the environment, and it helped build a positive company image (Nguyen & Nguyen, 2021). More and more companies want to develop a green image in this way. A similar approach could also be observed among administrations and individual customers. Each of them wanted to be perceived as "greener" than they actually were (Yildirim, 2023). The green information that was made available covered many areas of business operations and referred to different dimensions of impact. They were, therefore, challenging to verify. This required time, access to information and expertise in particular areas of science or technology. Verifying this information was so difficult for many people that they gave up (Hsu, 2011). At the same time, they believed the information and uncritically passed it on. The popularisation of information that was supposed to help create a "green" image was greatly helped by the development of the internet, and in particular social media (Schmuck et al., 2018). The number of people who shared such information grew exponentially (Ramtiyal et al., 2023). The more incredible and curiosity-provoking the news, the more willing people were to read it and pass it on completely uncritically, without giving any thought to its credibility.

It is therefore hardly surprising that manipulation began to appear in "green" company image building, helping to achieve the desired image more quickly, cheaply and manageably. The following years were a period of development of not only green marketing but also of its counterfeits (as greenwashing can be called) (Figure 2.3).

The end of the 20th century was the time when the term "greenwashing" began to be used as a general name for communications by entrepreneurs to improve their pro-environmental images (Pacheco-Ortiz et al., 2024). These positive image changes were and are achieved by unethical entrepreneurs through three groups of actions (leaving aside ethical green practices) (Vangeli et al., 2023):

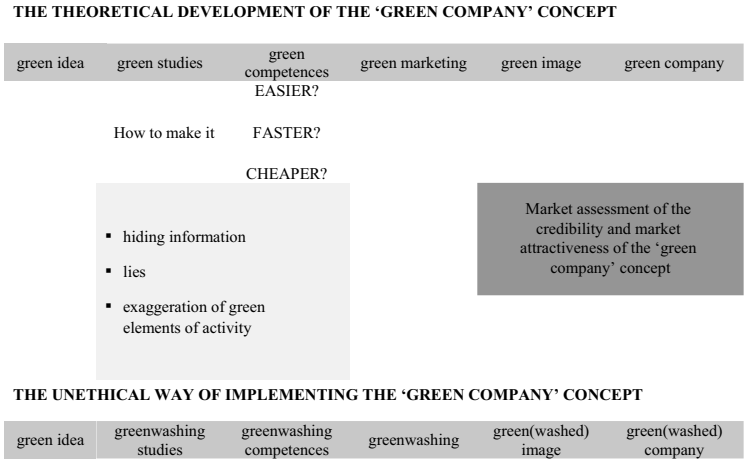

Figure 2.3 Greenwashing and the conditions for the development of the "green company" concept.

Authors' own.

- exaggerating their pro-environmental activities;
- hiding unfavourable facts;
- and misleading by lying about the company's environmental performance.

Thanks to these actions, entrepreneurs can attract environmentally conscious consumers to their offer (Jaiswal et al., 2022). And with increasing awareness of climate collapse and biodiversity loss, they are growing in number. Greenwashing messages help to create the impression that the situation in the area of environmental action is under control (Shin & Ki, 2022). They enable businesses to avoid or delay action by governments and organisations to develop effective regulations to combat pollution and activities harmful to the human environment, regulations the implementation of which would mean additional restrictions and expenses for entrepreneurs, thus slowing their enrichment.

The increased popularity of greenwashing is also a result of the difficulty in verifying information about the activities of companies and the nature of the offers they make to customers. Fast purchasing decisions mean customers are increasingly limiting their searches for information. If it is to be quick, the most exposed information is the easiest to reach, and they do not waste time verifying or analysing it in depth (Budzanowska-Drzewiecka & Proszowska, 2026).

The increasing affluence of many societies (and intrusive promotional activities) makes it easy to buy consumer goods. The rising economic use of products means that purchases are generally only meant to last a short while, so the time spent buying them cannot be too long. This is particularly evident in the clothing industry. Fast fashion (Yıldırım, 2021) is a new sales model in the clothing industry characterised by the instantaneous use of evolving trends in new clothing and launches of accessories. It used to be that clothing collections were released four times a year. Today, many brands are already talking about 52 "micro-seasons" a year. Some well-known fashion chains release up to 500 designs a week (Environmental Audit Committee, 2019).

Greenwashing is becoming an alarming universal activity, not only imputable to firms. There are multiple agents engaged in greenwashing. Lyon and Montgomery (2015) show that it can be observed in business organisations, governments and politicians, research organisations, international organisations, NGOs, and social and environmental movements.

As the intensity of the practices described increased, there was a growing need to explain and define greenwashing. This is difficult because the basis for identifying these activities is primarily intentions, which are difficult to interpret without a detailed analysis. However, the scale of the phenomenon and its negative consequences for the functioning of the market force us to take up this challenge (Schmuck et al., 2018). Consciously identified greenwashing is perceived very negatively by customers. However, on a day-to-day basis, consumers find it challenging to identify activities of this kind (Torelli et al., 2020).

Factors influencing the development and contemporary shape of greenwashing include (Vangeli et al., 2023):

- internal drivers: corporate, product and individual psychological drivers;
- stable external market drivers: environmental, governmental, and cultural drivers;
- dynamic external market drivers: supply chain, social media, and stakeholder drivers.

Given the vast list of factors influencing greenwashing, it is difficult to blame large corporations for its development and expect market self-regulation (Williams, 2024). Simultaneous action is needed in many dimensions and areas. Implementing multilateral pro-environmental solutions in the economy and society will not be possible without the development of green competencies among market participants (Mehta & Ali, 2021). According to the United Nations Industrial Development Organisation, green competencies are the knowledge, skills, values, and attitudes needed to live, develop, and support an environmentally friendly and resource-efficient society (Marcatajo, 2023).

The idea behind green competencies is that they will not be confined to the professional space associated with one's official position. Sensitivity to

environmental interdependencies is not only needed between 8:00 and 16:00. Skills, like soft competencies, are expected to translate into individual relationships, consumer choices, and ways of participating in culture and sport (Ramtiyal et al., 2023). These are key skills, attitudes, and values that support social, economic, and environmental sustainability. They have a behavioural and functional competence dimension. On the one hand, they involve creative thinking and ethical behaviour of an ecological nature and the ability to manage people under environmental risk conditions (Volschenk et al., 2022). On the other hand, specialised knowledge concerning the implementation of the specific procedures needed overlaps with ecological knowledge (Jaiswal et al., 2022).

Green competencies are a response to sustainability policies in the economy and sensitisation to the possibility of low-carbon activities (Volschenk et al., 2022). The thoughts and needs behind employees' green credentials are ethically correct and in line with the conditions we live in, but some instances of their real-world use are no longer necessarily so positive. Employees in green positions in large corporations can indeed indicate necessary pro-environmental solutions and can, with their communication skills, achieve their implementation. However, the result of these efforts can sometimes be quite different. They can be closer to greenwashing and green hypocrisy (Pacheco-Ortiz et al., 2024).

Nowadays, it is necessary to be aware of the environmental dimension of the actions of both individuals and companies. This needs to be borne in mind, irrespective of instances of pro-environmental competence being used as a facade for real anti-environmental actions by some actors (Bladt et al., 2024).

In recent years, terms such as "ecocriticism" and "green studies" have been coined to describe a critical approach to writing about nature. (Pendse et al., 2023) This approach emerged in the USA in the late 1980s and in the UK in the early 1990s. It aims to raise awareness of critical environmental dilemmas and make people aware of how they can preserve nature for future generations. Being environmentally conscious means being aware of your impact on the environment and actively doing more to ensure it is minimised.

Consumer attitudes to ecology are also changing (Budzanowska-Drzewiecka & Proszowska, 2023a). An initial fascination with radical ecological behaviour (e.g. giving up drinking beverages on hot days because it is impossible to buy anything to drink in non-plastic packaging) has given way to a belief that systemic and gradual solutions are needed. Radical mortification of individuals is less important than changes in business operations and new administrative solutions. Society today expects support from administrations and businesses to minimise its negative impact on the climate and the environment. These higher environmental expectations mean that companies' strategies, product offerings and how they advertise themselves are being scrutinised ever more closely (Leonidou et al., 2011). This makes accusations of unfair market practices, including greenwashing, more frequent. Customers

looking for green information about companies and their offers have an easier task. More and more information about companies' activities is available on the internet. Pro-environmental organisations and pro-environmental influencers are seeking and distributing such information. Observing their activities and publications is a source of green knowledge for many people, and it helps them to make sustainable market decisions. When making decisions, entrepreneurs know that information about their activities stays on the internet and it will sooner or later reach their stakeholders. An additional threat to the image of companies and entrepreneurs is that factual information on the internet is mixed with rumours and false accusations. Therefore, it is essential to avoid suspicions of greenwashing and environmentally harmful behaviour. Such accusations sometimes occur accidentally and are quickly withdrawn, but the accompanying discussion continues longer and can be very damaging to the perceived image of the entity accused.

2.3 Greenwashing – Attempting to Systematise and Define the Phenomenon

The term greenwashing comes from the word whitewashing, which means bleaching. Originally, whitewashing was meant to quickly and easily make dirty walls look clean, bright, and new (usually in country houses). Another meaning of whitewash is a deliberate attempt to hide unpleasant or incriminating facts about somebody (or some organisation) to protect their reputation. The word greenwashing is modelled on whitewashing. It refers to disinformation published by an organisation designed to create an environmentally responsible ("green") public image.

Sometimes, single activities are considered greenwashing, and in other cases long-term strategies and campaigns. Therefore, definitions of greenwashing include such different terms as "practices," "(marketing) strategies," "activities," "phenomena," and "declarations."

According to most contemporary sources of knowledge, "greenwashing" first appeared in 1986 in an essay by American activist Jay Westerveld. Westerveld described a situation in which a hotel encouraged guests to use their towels repeatedly and not return them for washing after one day. The hotel argued about ecology and the need to save water. In reality, it wanted to save money on the purchase of detergents. The key element influencing the assessment of the whole situation in this story is not the facts. The most important thing is the intention and expectations. Depending on the viewer's attitude, he or she will see ecological or economic reasons for the hotel management's decision.

The authors of reports about the occurrence of greenwashing can be very different. They may be individuals and institutions genuinely concerned about the climate and the environment, but not exclusively. Sometimes, such accusations are made by competitors as part of an unfair market fight or by

organisations that raise funds for their activities in this way (e.g. demanding payment for the withdrawal of accusations). This latter practice is periodically widespread on the occasion of public government investments, e.g. in the area of road infrastructure. In most cases, such an investment is a significant environmental change involving a reduction in green space and an increase in pollution or noise levels. It is very easy to point out these disadvantages and forget the benefits of the appearance of a well-designed road. To forget, of course, until there is a suitably attractive financial offer from a developer to "jog your memory."

In the 1960s, as the public became more environmentally conscious, more entrepreneurs began using greenwashing as a marketing strategy. One of the first more famous examples was the 1953 "Keep America Beautiful" campaign funded by beverage manufacturers. This campaign focused on recycling and littering, diverting attention from the corporate responsibility of the beverage manufacturers to protect the environment and the real impact of the products they offer. In this campaign, citizens were persuaded that the increasing amount of litter on the streets was due to their carelessness and not to the increase in litter resulting from, among other things, the growing amount of single-use packaging produced by the producers of chilled drinks. In the campaign, a unique name was even created for people who litter – litterbugs were to blame for everything. The campaign did not try to solve the waste problem from the production side and did nothing to penalise or set limits on corporate pollution. It was designed to shift the blame from companies that made trash to those who threw it out. Individual recipients of a message are usually vulnerable to manipulation of this kind. After hearing or seeing it repeatedly, the addressees of a message of this kind start to believe it. They become victims of manipulation – they replicate inappropriate behaviour and at the same time become entrenched in the belief that the source of problems is the behaviour of others. Unfortunately, more and more entrepreneurs are concluding that it is easier to create a socially acceptable interpretation of their inappropriate behaviour than to change it according to sustainability standards.

The adverse effects of greenwashing include a growing awareness of it, which often discourages consumers, who lose faith that their pro-environmental behaviour and purchasing decisions can translate into real environmental action and environmental protection. This reinforces cynical attitudes to any environmental initiative and negatively impacts the implementation of ethically led projects. In any pro-environmental initiative, the rationale for greenwashing is sought, and all the ecological demands and behaviours of those participating are questioned. Greenwashing is so strongly present in promoting culture and sport that the terms "greenwashing culture" (Miller, 2018) and "greenwashing sport" (Miller, 2017) have already appeared in the literature. Concepts are understood as the sponsorship of cultural and sporting initiatives (competitions, festivals, entire sports teams, individual athletes, artists, etc.) by companies that negatively

impact the environment (e.g. gas and petroleum). Many oil, energy, and mining companies are in such a strong financial position that they have financial surpluses to invest in promoting their activities. They very often choose mass events, popular sports, or cultural events as recipients of their sponsorship activities. Positive attitudes of participants and observers to the activities sponsored translate into positive attitudes towards the sponsor. The sponsorship activity itself is socially acceptable. On the other hand, if a company tries to hide a lack of environmental action behind this type of sponsorship, it is greenwashing (of sport or culture, depending on the object of the sponsorship).

Greenwashing can take place in different stages of a product's life cycle and can also refer to experiences at the level of the individual manufacturer or distributor and not just the product, thus extending the scope of consideration beyond marketing.

In 1991, a study in the *Journal of Public Policy and Marketing* found that 58% of green advertising contained at least one misleading claim. In response, Greenpeace published the *Greenpeace Book of Greenwash* in 1992, describing corporate greenwashing instances. According to a TerraChoice Environmental Marketing report, of more than 1,000 advertisements containing pro-environmental claims surveyed, only one was beyond reproach (Lane, 2012). In the following years, more sustainability organisations have published lists of the most notorious cases of greenwashing (e.g. Akepa, 2025; Murphy, 2024; TechTarget, n.d.).

These rankings have always been produced on a discretionary basis by different teams and according to various criteria, but one thing they have in common is that they are getting longer and longer. This is not only because such activities are increasing (although they are). It is also because the sensitivity (ecological, social, and ethical) of the addressees of the messages and observers of contemporary market activities is changing – more and more environmental (and other) activities are being interpreted as unethical or abusive. Recipients of marketing messages are increasingly aware that producers are manipulating them. Therefore, they are becoming increasingly suspicious of the information that reaches them.

In defining greenwashing, it is emphasised that it is a phenomenon based on deliberate action related to disclosure decisions that benefit companies while harming the environment and society in the social and environmental areas (Bernini et al., 2023). This phenomenon is often identified based on accusations made against a company by external actors, such as media representatives or NGOs, of misrepresenting its environmental responsibility. Without verification of these accusations, one can speak of hypothetical greenwashing. The study of this phenomenon and its harmfulness consists of analysing the causes and consequences of these actions.

Greenwashing is defined as practices aimed at presenting an organisation and its products as environmentally friendly using appropriate statements,

terminology, and images. This result is achieved through the misuse of environmental slogans, the use of terminology incomprehensible to consumers, the inconsistency of advertised product features with the company's conduct, and the provision of unreliable or false data. Such actions deliberately mislead consumers. Therefore, disinformation is disseminated by an organisation creating a false, unfounded, and intentionally misleading image, seeking to create an image of an organisation with a responsible approach to the environment and society.

Greenwashing can affect different areas of a company's operations, take different forms and be implemented with different tactics. The three main areas in which activities are considered to be greenwashing are shown in Figure 2.4:

- product labelling and ingredient claims amounting to misrepresentation;
- environmental impact reporting, which is to be understood as a lack of or false ecological impact reporting;
- advertising campaigns in which entrepreneurs convince addressees with misleading messages about the environmental sustainability of their company or product.

Among the companies accused of greenwashing practices are those that appear in one or more of the areas mentioned. More specific examples of actions categorised as greenwashing practices include (Vangeli et al., 2023):

Figure 2.4 Enterprise operations in which activities considered greenwashing are identified.

Authors' own.

- misrepresenting the environmental impacts of a product;
- highlighting green facts that are not related to the actual state of affairs (i.e. they refer, for example, to the activities of the whole company and not to activities related to the product that is the subject of the information message);
- referring to facts that are the result of previously introduced regulations and not a decision by the organisation itself (e.g. claiming in the US that deodorant does not destroy the ozone layer because it does not contain chlorofluorocarbons, while their use in the industry had already been banned there many years earlier);
- representing cost-cutting measures as caring for the environment (e-invoices, less frequent use of towels in hotels, energy-efficient lighting);
- failing to provide credible certificates and other proofs of the environmental performance of an offer or service (relying instead on general green declarations);
- deliberate use of general and vague statements in communications with stakeholders to describe an organisation's product, which may be misunderstood by the consumer (e.g. natural ingredients, which can also be both hazardous to the user and harmful to the environment, buzz communication);
- proving that a product is less harmful compared to (even more harmful) others by introducing small details of an ecological nature, e.g. "more environmentally friendly" pesticides; another example is justifying a lack of environmental action by showing "worse" examples in the environment or another part of the world;
- unsubstantiated (unauthorised) use of environmental labels and certificates;
- use of overly suggestive images and messages providing imaginary data to substantiate a claim that a product is environmentally friendly; these are most often words, colours, images, comparisons, and metaphors, evoking "green" associations with the product; such suggestions may appear in the names of products, their advertisements and on their packaging; defining the brand image of the company based on green associations will effectively convince people to believe that the production and use of the given product is environmentally friendly;
- exposing the introduction of ecological changes in selected stages of the product life cycle and concealing the overall real impact of the product on the environment, e.g. talking only about environmental changes in the packaging without showing the effects of the product technology on the environment;
- intentionally omitting information in communication with stakeholders, the disclosure of which could adversely affect the image of the company or the product (e.g. a dry cleaner is called an eco-friendly laundry and

nowhere does the information about the way clothes are cleaned appear; cotton clothes do not contain artificial additives, but their production requires much water, etc.).

Because many of these actions are based on insinuations and assumptions, it has been difficult in the past to call their authors to account for their effects. In the early days of diagnosing greenwashing, the responsibility for it was mainly moral and ethical. It was challenging to prove the evil will of perpetrators and to convict them, even if the consequences of their actions were significant for the victims of greenwashing. Therefore, there was a need to define what greenwashing is and introduce legislation to punish abuses of this kind. At the same time, today's entrepreneurs are striving to eliminate accusations of greenwashing made against them unequivocally and to demonstrate their compliance with ESG standards (Dumitrescu et al., 2022).

The growing awareness of the harmful effects of greenwashing is causing widespread discussion of these practices and generating a demand for the area to be cleaned up with legislation carrying real criminal sanctions for non-compliance. This is also because market participants do not trust the information traders publish. They are more likely to use external reports and social reporting to assess the credibility of offers and partners (Witek, 2013). One initiative that supports the identification of greenwashing activities is the Greenwashing Index (EnviroMedia Social Marketing, n.d.). EnviroMedia Social Marketing developed the project with the University of Oregon School of Journalism and Communication. The Greenwashing Index is an initiative to help people make informed decisions about the products and services they purchase and how their donations are used. The creators of this index divide companies into three groups:

- companies that care about the environment; their green advertisements are the whole truth;
- companies that use genuine "green" messages, although there are also environmentally harmful elements hidden in their operations;
- companies whose "green" advertisements have nothing to do with the truth; in this case, they appeal to the intuition and intelligence of the audience, who can often tell at a glance that a given piece of information about a company is a lie.

The value of the Greenwashing Index (Table 2.1) for a particular advertisement (or advertising campaign) is calculated by comparing it with a list of statements assessing its credibility and compliance with green standards. The statements take the form of accusations of greenwashing practices. Confirmation of the fact that individual statements apply to the advertisement

in question is a further point that is added to the score. The higher the score, the worse for the company that uses the assessed advertisement.

A Greenwashing Index value is obtained by addressing the above statements and summarising the answers to the questions (Table 2.1). At first glance, the Greenwashing Index appears to be an instrument that is too general and simple to be used to identify greenwashing. However, at the same time, it can be seen that its simplicity is its strength. It makes the tool accessible to all market participants and thus spreads the possibility of identifying greenwashing to as many market participants as possible.

Initially, greenwashing was most often identified in environmental activities. However, nowadays false claims in the area of sustainable development activities are also considered greenwashing, i.e. in addition to environmental issues, it can also include topics related to social equity and economic prosperity (Gourier & Mathurin, 2024).

The banking sector is also analysing the diagnosis of greenwashing (European Banking Authority, 2023) (European Securities and Markets Authority, 2024).

Table 2.1 Greenwashing index scoring criteria. Authors' own, based on EnviroMedia Social Marketing, n.d.

Main Scoring Criteria	*Additional Questions*
The advertisement misleads with words.	Do you think the advertisement is misleading about the product's environmental impact? Considering only the words in the advertisement, what does the advert say?
The advertisement misleads with visuals and/or graphics.	Do you think the advertiser has used green or natural imagery in such a way that viewers would think that the object of the advert is more environmentally friendly than it is?
The advertisement makes a green claim that is vague or seemingly unprovable.	Does the advertisement claim environmental benefits without sufficiently explaining what they are? Has the advertiser stated the source of the information?
The advertisement overstates or exaggerates how green the product/company/service is.	Does the advertiser overstate the environmental performance of the product advertised? Are the environmental claims made in the advertisement credible? Is it possible for the product/company to do the things depicted/claimed in the advert?
The advertisement leaves out or masks important information, making the green claim sound better than it is.	Is the advertising intended to divert attention from the company's other activities? Does the advertising take into account significant side effects of the product/service?

2.4 Categories of Greenwashing and Greenwashing Claims in Marketing Communications

The complexity of greenwashing and its relevance to modern business processes have led to many typologies. Researchers (Vangeli et al., 2023) distinguish direct greenwashing (most internal), vicarious greenwashing, and indirect greenwashing (most external).

Greenwashing can have two basic dimensions at the macro level: firm level and product/service level (Figure 2.5). In the first case, the direct object of the activity is to generate green messages about the company itself. In the second case, the object of greenwashing is a product.

An analysis (Torelli et al., 2020) of reactions to the aforementioned types of greenwashing (Figure 2.5) finds that product-level greenwashing practices affect brand attitudes more negatively than firm-level ones. According to Bladt et al. (2024), on average, firm-level greenwashing practices lead to more negative brand attitudes than product-level ones. The differences between these assessments are likely due to different examples being studied and the diverse profiles of the respondent groups. More detailed breakdowns of levels of greenwashing also appear in some sources. According to Vangeli et al. (2023), the following types can be distinguished:

- corporate-level greenwashing – affects the company's image and reputation;
- strategic-level greenwashing – affects the company's future strategies;

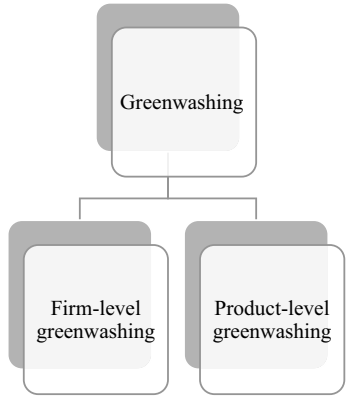

Figure 2.5 General classifications of greenwashing.

Authors' own based on de Freitas Netto et al. (2020) and Delmas and Burbano, (2011).

- dark-level greenwashing – refers to hidden illegal activities such as money laundering or corruption;
- product-level greenwashing – refers to the specific characteristics of a product.

Within both company-level and product/service-level greenwashing, a distinction can be made between claim greenwashing and executional greenwashing. The essence of claim greenwashing, which is more widely described in the literature, is a message containing much information to mislead the recipient. Tateishi (2018) distinguishes two typologies of green claims: claim type and claim deceptiveness. Claim types can be divided into:

- product orientation – claims that emphasise the ecological attributes of a product;
- process orientation – statements emphasising the ecological high performance of a manufacturing and/or an environmental disposal method;
- image orientation – statements emphasising the eco-friendly image of an organisation;
- environmental fact orientation – independent, seemingly, factual statements by an organisation about the environment as a whole;
- combination – statements that are a combination of the above.

Among claim deceptiveness, one can distinguish:

- vague/ambiguous – claims that are ambiguous and lack a clear definition;
- omission – claims that are too general and do not contain information that would help assess their credibility;
- false/outright lies – statements that are made up or inaccurate;
- combination – statements that are a combination of the above;
- acceptable – statements that do not contain misleading content.

Table 2.2 provides one of the breakdowns of greenwashing claims found in the literature and examples of each claim category. False greenwashing affects brand attitude more negatively than vague greenwashing. This is

Table 2.2 Greenwashing claims. Authors based on Bladt et al. (2024)

Greenwashing Claims Type	
Firm level	Product level
False (lying)	False (broken promises)
Vague (vagueness)	Vague (fuzzy reporting)
Hidden information (lesser of two evils)	Hidden information (dirty business)

because false claims are more straightforward for the recipient to identify. Vague claims are less clear, especially for less educated or attentive audiences. In addition, hidden-information greenwashing affects attitudes towards brands more negatively than vague and false greenwashing.

Executional greenwashing (de Freitas Netto et al., 2020) (intentionally or not) uses nature-evoking elements to induce false perceptions of a brand's greenness.

According to Torelli et al. (2020), greenwashing can be divided into:

- strategic-level greenwashing, i.e. misleading environmental communication related to future enterprise strategies;
- dark-level greenwashing, which is understood as misleading environmental communication finalised to hide illegal activities.

In more detail, the following types of greenwashing can be distinguished:

- hidden opportunity costs (hidden actions) – a company gives incorrect (or incomplete) information about the environmental impact of a product; an example would be a description of electronic equipment which highlights its energy efficiency but omits to state that it is made of environmentally hazardous materials;
- unrelatedness – referring to product parameters that are not reflected in available sources and not confirmed by any recognised certification bodies (e.g. a claim in the United States that something "does not contain CFCs" – i.e. chlorofluorocarbons, the use of which was banned in the United States many years ago);
- lack of evidence – there is no information available on the environmental performance of the product or any reliable certification; the information is based on stereotypes and intuitive judgements;
- lack of precision – product descriptions are inaccurate or imprecise; consumers may misunderstand them; an example is the term "all natural," which is associated by ordinary users with ecology and pro-environmental activity; e.g. arsenic, uranium, mercury, and formaldehyde are present in nature but are toxic – "natural" does not necessarily mean "green"; a similar example would be products made of natural leather and pure cotton – the manufacturing technologies of both these materials have a very invasive impact on the environment. It often turns out that with an economically (simply not ecologically) organised production process, a high consumption of water, use of various types of bleach, leather tanning substances, or dyes makes production of these "natural" products much more invasive for the environment than that of clothes or accessories made from synthetic materials;

- the lesser of two evils – communication on this issue emphasises reduction of the harmfulness of a given solution in one dimension, completely ignoring that overall it is still harmful; for example, "green" cigarettes, "environmentally friendly" pesticides, eco-friendly leather, etc.;
- white lies – companies illegally and unjustifiably use eco-labels and certifications and use over-exaggerated suggestive imagery giving fictitious data to certify the environmental performance of a product – in other words, false labelling to mislead the customer; sometimes these are genuine certifications misused and without the required authority; in other cases, companies use fragments of ecological messages, slogans, colours, to improve their image; an example is the Arla brand, which put on the packaging of its long-life milk product the information that it reduces CO_2 emissions by 72%; they omitted to add that the information refers only to the packaging and not to the whole milk (FESPA, n.d.).[1]

The Planet Tracker Report (Willis et al., 2023) shows the destructive nature of greenwashing more fully and distinguishes six primary greenwashing tactics, which it names the greenwashing hydra. These are otherwise known as six shades of green (Figure 2.6):

- Greencrowding is based on the belief that in a larger group (in a crowd) it is easier to fight to slow down green reforms and to maintain the current status quo; some social protests are inspired by environments and companies for which the green solutions introduced would be a source of additional costs; besides, reporting the changes introduced in the form of results for the whole industry allows boasting of large numerical values of positive results. At the same time, it conceals that the result obtained is only a tiny part of what the entire industry could achieve. Companies that do not want pro-environmental changes set up associations. They lobby for the relaxation or slowing down of regulatory changes that force a search for new greener production solutions. This is often the sole (or primary) purpose of these associations.
- Greenlighting occurs when a company's communications (including advertisements) spotlight a mainly green feature of its operations or products, however small it is, to draw attention away from environmentally damaging activities being conducted elsewhere. Spotlighting these green areas helps to hide the non-green areas of the business. An example would be leather entrepreneurs who highlight the natural origin of their products while hiding the fact that leather production is environmentally damaging. It generates much waste from artificial tanning agents and other chemicals used during production. The wastes produced by this industry are very toxic to the environment. Disposal of them is costly and very burdensome. The manufacturing process itself is very

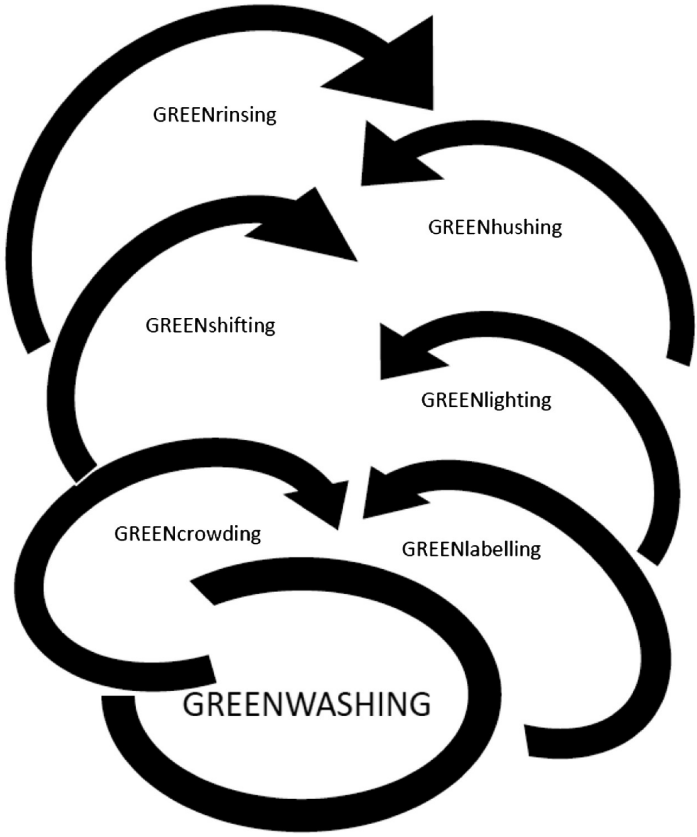

Figure 2.6 Greenwashing Hydra.

Authors based on LinkedIn Pulse, n.d. In many studies, the list of types of greenwashing is more extensive. Some authors write of seven, ten or more types of greenwashing sins (more details are presented in Chapter 1).

taxing on the workers involved. Users of leather bags are also concerned about the ethical treatment of the animals whose skins are used in production. Not everyone today is vegetarian or vegan, but those who cannot give up meat and its derivatives expect these raw materials to be obtained humanely. Concealing non-compliance in the areas above by focusing on the natural character of leather is an example of this variety of greenwashing.

- Greenshifting is when companies imply that consumers are at fault and shift the blame onto them. They emphasise, for example, the importance of customers' purchasing behaviour in increasing pollution (large purchases of the company's products) and overlook the fact that the whole offer they make is harmful. This corporate behaviour is relatively easy to identify, so it can be expected that entrepreneurs will use it less and less. At the same time, it is essential to remember that behavioural economics and neuromarketing developments are making businesses' promotional activities more and more effective. They are also one of the reasons why customers are increasingly willing to buy. However, these decisions are increasingly supported by incentives from product providers. The fault lies on both sides, so only putting the blame on consumers is dishonest.
- Green-labelling is a practice in which marketers call something green or sustainable, but a more detailed examination reveals that this is misleading. Green-labelling can often be found on product labels and in company marketing communications. Sometimes, even though claims may only be partially misleading, they make assessing the offer under consideration difficult. There are a whole host of terms, such as green, natural, and environmentally friendly, that sound pro-environmental but are sometimes difficult to interpret positively and are unhelpful in purchasing decisions.
- Greenrinsing is when a company regularly modifies (lowers) its ESG targets before a deadline to avoid being accused of not meeting them. This type of modification can be seen in PepsiCo and Coca-Cola's packaging recycling target rates. Initially, targets are defined at a very high level, allowing the company to reap an image premium from these aims. After receiving positive comments, the company changed the ESG targets. Even if this is met with a hostile reception, it does not cancel the previous image benefits. A variation of greenrinsing is talking about sustainability plans and the company's and employees' concern for the environment in the early stages of defining them, when it is not yet clear that they are likely to be implemented.
- Greenhushing refers to corporate management teams under-reporting or hiding their sustainability credentials to evade investor scrutiny. The company may fear a pushback from stakeholders who would find its sustainability efforts lacking. Greenhushing limits the quantity and quality of publicly available information. Without this transparency, it becomes challenging to analyse corporate climate targets and, for instance, share best practices on decarbonisation.

To carry out these types of greenwashing, companies often rely on the support of other entities or individuals or sometimes carry them out on their own. A vast sector of green services has emerged to help market participants make

their operations look more "green." As a result, these activities tend to be very complex and, therefore, more difficult for stakeholders to identify. This results in additional difficulties in identifying and eliminating manifestations of greenwashing in the market.

The phenomenon of greenwashing has gained prominence in recent years, particularly in the context of global discussions on sustainability and climate change. In response, the European Union and other international organisations have introduced regulations to curb greenwashing practices, promote transparency of companies' green operations, and legally compel companies to operate according to green market standards (Changing Markets, n.d.).[2]

In some systematic approaches, greenwashing is one of the so-called "social washing varieties." This umbrella term covers all manner of ethical activity, or rather inactivity, and goes beyond care of natural resources to include labour and human rights, gender equality, modern-day slavery, and more. This group of activities includes greenwashing, which is the subject of this book, and its variations:

- Beewashing – the importance of bees to the economy and human life, and the need to care for their welfare has been emphasised for many years; some companies have recognised that to improve their image they can implement bee activities, but companies claiming to be supporting bees while being uninformed and causing significant damage to bee populations are accused of beewashing (Mendini et al., 2022).
- Blackwashing (Ruiz-Blanco et al., 2022) – or racebending, is taking an originally white character and making them black or a person of colour; such accusations are most common in the film community, which attempts to add diversity to its films with these actions.
- Carbonwashing (In & Schumacher, 2021) – a term used to describe a practice of companies claiming to be environmentally friendly or sustainable without taking significant steps to reduce their carbon footprint; they spread misleading or unsubstantiated claims about their carbon impacts or initiatives.
- Redwashing – the practice of a state, organisation, political party, or company presenting itself as progressive and concerned about social equality and justice for public relations or economic gain (Müller, 2017; Bemari Insights, n.d.).[3]
- Sharewashing (Simplicable, n.d.)[4] uses the popularity of the sharing economy and claims to be based on person-to-person relations. It appeals to ideas of "sharing" and community to sell products or services, blurring the business's commercial and for-profit nature.
- Pink-washing – declaring support for breast cancer efforts despite the detrimental impact of their activities on the incidence of the disease; named after Ford Motor Company's 2018 campaign slogan "Put the

brakes on breast cancer." Ford Motor Company runs Warriors in Pink, a programme they say is "dedicated to helping those touched by breast cancer." However, exhaust from Ford's vehicles increases the risk of breast cancer (BC Action, n.d.).[5]

- Rainbow-washing – using slogans in favour of the fight for LGBTQ+ rights in the promotion of one's business, and at the same time, accepting non-compliance with these rights by cooperators. Such an accusation was faced by Stonewall and Primark, which ordered Pride T-shirts in Turkey, a country with a poor record on LGBT rights.
- Brownwashing – declaring support for black, brown, indigenous and coloured people while not implementing anti-racist and/or BIPoC empowering circumstances in the business (Sustainable Fashion Matterz, n.d.).
- Bluewashing involves linking a company to charitable causes or social justice initiatives to create a positive image in the eyes of the public while hiding its or its partners' actions that are inconsistent with these standards. Bluewashing often involves misleading consumers about a company's social responsibility efforts.
- Wokewashing – diverting attention from and/or covering up activities by promoting progressive values, mainly on social and political issues such as minorities, discrimination, and injustice.
- Purplewashing – analogous to the previous ones, except concerning rights and discrimination against women.
- Leanwashing is making a product or service appear healthier than it is through advertising or other forms of marketing (fruit candies full of vitamins derived from fruits; milk from a cow grazing in a meadow in ecologically clean areas; light products, etc.).

The primary ways of developing these forms of "washing," as in the case of greenwashing, are:

- incomplete information;
- misleading labelling and lack of independent verification;
- vague language;
- vague or broad claims;
- overemphasis on marketing;
- failure to address systemic issues;
- lack of transparency and accountability.

Also helping these "washings" to create a better image of a company (as more socially responsible) is omission of information that would show the company's lack of commitment in the area, inaccurate (and even deceitful) information on packaging and in advertising messages, and a lack of transparency of operations.

2.5 Greenwashing Impacts on Business and Marketing Communication

Ignoring the tightening of greenwashing regulations worldwide and continuing the practices described could have significant consequences for companies. The consequences can include, among others:

- reputational damage: damage to reputation, loss of consumer confidence and potential impact on financial performance;
- legal consequences: non-compliance can lead to legal action resulting in fines, penalties, and sometimes even suspension of business operations;
- increased compliance costs: to comply with greenwashing regulations companies will have to invest in hiring legal and sustainability experts and conducting environmental audits by third parties;
- worsened competitive situations: failure to comply with greenwashing regulations will put a company at a disadvantage as consumers increasingly prioritise environmentally friendly products and services.

Negative phenomena associated with inadequate implementation of a "green strategy" can also include:

- Greenwishing, which refers to unintentional deception regarding engagement in sustainability. This phenomenon is associated with an intensely exhibited belief in the necessity of implementing sustainability activities and declaring plans to initiate such activities, which are not later implemented. Discontinuation of previously declared sustainable actions can be for various reasons, not always dependent on the will of the declarant, but empty promises can mislead and cause similar problems to greenwashing.
- Greenhushing, which, in contrast to greenwashing, involves deliberately keeping quiet about sustainability efforts even when the company implements them. The reason for greenhushing is fear of accusations of greenwashing. With this approach, they manage to avoid criticism, but this is unsuitable for sustainability efforts. By hiding their activities in this area, entrepreneurs do not promote the idea of sustainability and so do not inspire others to take actions of this kind.

One can find many more of these terms (e.g. CSR-washing, vegan-washing), but at some point, one must stop the fragmentation of this subject matter. One may wonder if so many terms are needed. However, what is more important is that socially and consumer-wise, the public sees these unfair practices and the unfair communication of them. It seems that they go significantly beyond environmental and ecological issues alone.

To avoid accusations of greenwashing (Haberberg et al., 2010), entrepreneurs should keep in mind:

- transparency – a lack of transparency in operations and ambiguous messages sent by a company can be interpreted negatively by its stakeholders;
- the need for third-party verification – if a company is the only source of information about itself, accusations of message unreliability will very quickly arise; to avoid such accusations, it is worth ensuring that there is external, reliable, and objective information about the environmental impact of a product;
- the importance of environmental management – a genuine and deep commitment to sustainability improves a company's credibility and reduces the threat of accusations of greenwashing;
- the importance of following through – it is not enough to be aware of the need for sustainability actions and declare their future implementation; it is necessary to continually work to reduce a company's environmental impact;
- the role of consumers – through the opinions they publish and the purchasing decisions they make, consumers express their attitude to a company's actions, which translates into changes in its market image.

To increase the likelihood of avoiding accusations of greenwashing, companies should work on a sustainability strategy (Ghimouz et al., 2023) (Figure 2.7). They should implement the following steps to begin optimising it (Plana Earth, n.d.):[6]

- review and audit all marketing materials and environmental claims;
- substantiate environmental claims;
- carry out rigorous carbon accounting;
- implement standardised environmental labels;
- train employees on greenwashing and regulations;
- continually monitor and update marketing materials**.**

2.6 Conclusions

Constant analysis of the business carried out considering state-of-the-art and newly introduced legal solutions helps minimise the threat of being accused of environmentally harmful activities. Adherence to environmental standards and the pursuit of certifications developed by authorities on sustainability and the circular economy helps define the greenest strategy and build trust in the company by other market participants (Pacheco-Ortiz et al., 2024).

However, formal regulations restricting greenwashing activities do not necessarily increase the positive environmental effects of green products

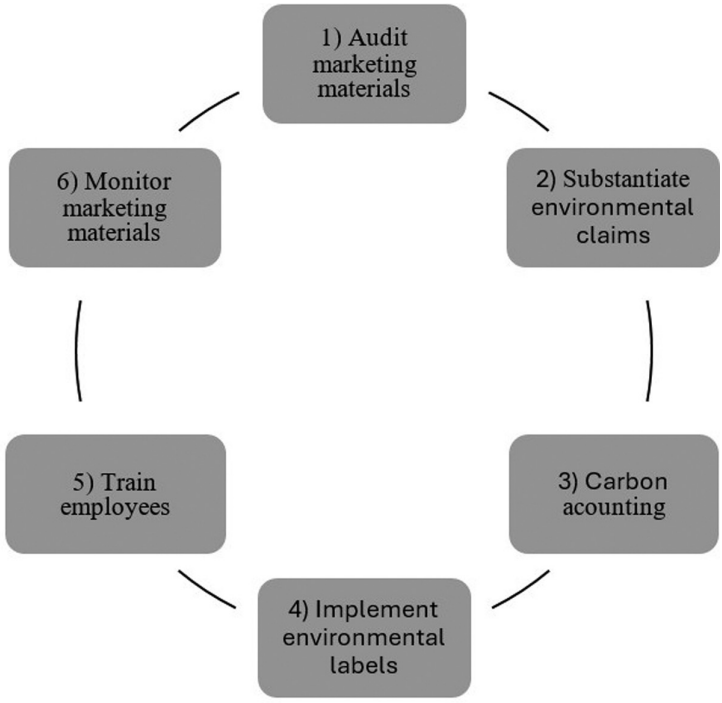

Figure 2.7 Developing a sustainability strategy.
Authors' own, based on (White, 2009).

(Krstić et al., 2021). Controlling all potential areas of greenwashing may prove impossible or simply too expensive. Some believe it is better to focus on reducing its negative consequences. A recent study by Glavas et al. (2023) shows how the occurrence of greenwashing can be used to promote more sustainable practices by companies:

- greenwashing raises awareness of the problem and generates a need for environmental action (Bulut et al., 2021);
- stigmatising greenwashing forces companies to take responsibility for their actions and modify their strategies to be more pro-environmental (Pacheco-Ortiz et al., 2024);
- greenwashing can be a set of aspirations for a company and a driver of future change (Silva et al., 2020);

- the existence of environmentally conscious customers and their interest in existing greenwashing practices sparks a need to implement a green strategy (Pendse et al., 2023).

Notes

1 https://www.fespa.com/pl/media-informacyjne/jak-rozpoznac-greenwashing; accessed 05.01.2025
2 https://changingmarkets.org/wp-content/uploads/2023/10/CM-Greenwash-timeline-March-2023-.pdf, accessed 13.05.2025
3 https://www.bemari.co.uk/insights/the-laundry-list-of-sustainability-washing; accessed 13.05.2025
4 https://simplicable.com/new/sharewashing; accessed 13.05.2025
5 https://www.bcaction.org/about-think-before-you-pink/campaigns/put-the-brakes-on-breast-cancer/; accessed 13.05.2025
6 https://plana.earth/academy/how-eu-greenwashing-regulations-impact-business; accessed 13.05.2025

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