

Greenwashing Practices in Company Marketing Communications

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3 Towards Green Advertising

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3 Towards Green Advertising

3.1 Introduction

Environmental factors are becoming increasingly important in the market decisions of consumers. Ethical consumption is becoming an increasingly important category of such factors. It is accepted (Williams, 2024) that this is not a clearly distinguishable set of practices but a broad term for a group of trends in contemporary consumer economies. The main variables determining environmental preferences and practices are perceived behavioural control, environmental consciousness, eco-literacy, and willingness to pay more for green products (Jones, 2019; Tallontire et al., 2001). For a final commitment to ethical consumption, eco-literacy (Silva et al., 2020) and consumer environmental knowledge are most important. The higher the level of consumers' knowledge about the impact of consumption on the ecosystem, the more sustainable decisions they will make. Consumers with higher levels of environmental consciousness seek more environmentally friendly products and offers (Zavali & Theodoropoulou, 2018; Krstić et al., 2021).

Understanding of ethical consumption is evolving strongly. In the past, it was primarily associated with consumption restrictions, in line with the slogan "less is more." An ethical consumer today looks more holistically at the environmental impact of a company's production and its subsequent use by customers.

The ethical consumer is also defined differently today. The term is usually equated with the green consumer. For some, a green consumer can be identified by their interest in the environment (this was the original approach). In contrast, when describing this concept, it is important for others to determine how green the consumer's purchasing decisions are and how strongly he or she is interested in implementing the 3R concepts (Recycle, Reuse, Reduce). This approach is more contemporary, with the 3R concept being replaced by the 5R concept (Refuse, Reduce, Reuse, Recycle, Rot) and later by the 7R (Rethink, Refuse, Reduce, Reuse, Repair, Regift, Recycle) (Jestratijevic et al., 2022; Setyaningsih et al., 2023).

There are three broad areas of ethical consumerism (Figure 3.1):

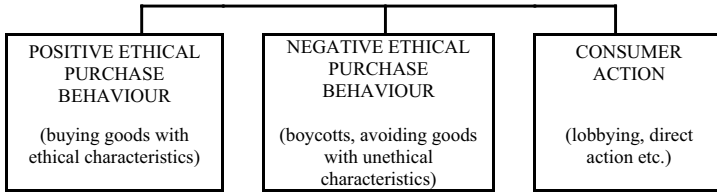


Figure 3.1 Types of ethical consumerism.

Authors' own, based on Tallontire et al., 2001

- positive: buying or not buying products with ethical characteristics;
- negative: avoiding or boycotting products with unethical characteristics;
- consumer action: taking direct action to show the ethical point of view.

Ethical consumerism has three main components (Oke et al., 2020):

- animal welfare;
- the environment;
- human rights/working conditions and fair trade.

Each of these three components has positive and negative aspects: the products and practices which are upheld and promoted and those which are deplored and avoided/boycotted.

Awareness of the ethical dimensions of environmental and social issues, and more recently food issues, appears to be growing. However, there is a discrepancy between increased awareness and ethical purchasing behaviour (Jaiswal et al., 2022). Many consumers declare that they are pro-environmentally aware but do not implement this awareness in their everyday behaviour and purchasing decisions (Chen & Lee, 2015). The term “green consumerism” appears in the literature, and it is defined as a market orientation in which consumers’ decisions on purchasing, product use, and disposal are driven by a desire to preserve the ecological balance of nature (Williams, 2024).

There has been a further development from ethical consumerism – sustainable consumption.¹ Sustainable consumption means conscious and rational use of available goods to minimise harmful environmental effects (Setyaningsih et al., 2023). Sustainable consumption aims to meet the needs and improve the quality of life for all locally and globally while respecting human and labour rights, considering the possibility of satisfying the needs of others, including future generations, and preserving and restoring natural capital for them.

Sustainable consumption involves the reduction of waste, waste production, pollution, and the selection of goods and services that best meet certain ethical, social, and environmental criteria (Chai et al., 2025). Sustainable consumption is closely linked to sustainable development, i.e. development that is considered to be stable, taking into account processes of change in which resource exploitation, investment divisions, directions of technical progress, and institutional change remain in uncontroversial and harmonious response to each other, providing opportunities to meet human needs and aspirations in the future. Progressive climate change requires the implementation of this idea not only in companies or production facilities but also in households and individual consumer decisions. All market players are aware of the need to implement such behaviour and the complexity of doing so. They are, therefore, looking very hard for information to help them do so. Hence, green propaganda slogans and green marketing are popular (Salciuviene et al., 2022).

3.2 Green Marketing and Green Advertising

A natural consequence of the emergence of ethical and sustainable consumption has been green marketing, a business strategy that promotes companies' products, services, and activities in an environmentally friendly way, encouraging consumers to make more informed choices. One of its features is transparency and identifying alternative ways to meet consumer needs (Yang et al., 2020).

Green marketing assumes a long-term effect based on complex activities involving pro-environmental changes in a company and its operations. For a company genuinely concerned about the environment, financial returns are a side-effect of green activities, not their primary objective (Munaier et al., 2022).

One of the successful results of green marketing is educating and building the environmental awareness of stakeholders by communicating the environmental impact of their decisions and encouraging more sustainable choices (Polonsky, 1994; Khandelwal & Singh, 2023). An essential element is promoting environmentally friendly products and services, e.g. eco-friendly packaging, recycled materials, and renewable energy sources (Boztepe, 2013). On a day-to-day basis, companies apply sustainable business practices, such as implementing green solutions in production processes, distribution, and waste management. This all serves to build an image of a sustainable company (Lane, 2012).

Green, sustainable, and organic marketing respond to society's growing interest in the impact of increasing consumption on the environment (Moravcikova et al., 2017). Green marketing consists of multiple activities created to ensure the key feature of business exchange with minimal negative environmental impacts (Choudri et al., 2017). Green marketing is a holistic

management process of efficiently and sustainably identifying, anticipating, and meeting market participants' needs (Peattie, 2015).

Green marketing covers a wide range of activities (Jaiswal et al., 2022; Khandelwal & Singh, 2023; Kumar et al., 2023). Among its most popular strategies are:

- Producing sustainable products. In the production process, striving to make products that meet the expectations of buyers while minimising the negative impacts of the process on the environment. Producers look for clean manufacturing technologies and try to be increasingly rational in their use of inputs. This ensures that consumers enjoy the product they buy and their commitment to caring for the environment.
- Using sustainable materials to make products. This can mean using recycled materials or other eco-friendly materials, like product packaging that is more easily biodegradable. It will also mean caring for the rational use of natural resources in production and protecting endangered areas.
- Responsible waste disposal is a massive problem in today's global economy. Previously, waste management amounted to exporting waste to remote regions instead of disposing of it. Today, socially responsible companies are minimising waste in their manufacturing processes by choosing green technologies, recycling, reusing, and reducing consumption. For customers, the most noticeable changes are in packaging, which is prepared from more environmentally friendly materials and uses environmentally friendly technologies. Customers appreciate being aware of their contribution to climate action and that the packaging of purchased products takes up less space and is cheaper and easier to dispose of later (Lisowski et al., 2022).
- Opting for electronic marketing. Digitalising marketing processes also has a sustainable dimension. By replacing paper-based workflows with electronic ones, unnecessary costs are eliminated, and the carbon footprint of processes is reduced.
- Implementing eco-friendly energy practices. A technological revolution in energy sources has recently occurred. More and more technologies are available to produce green (or near-green) energy. As a rule, producing it requires expensive modernisation, so the willingness to use it verifies the green attitudes of enterprises. If they choose traditional energy sources, which are cheaper and more harmful to the environment, they are not green enterprises.
- Promoting green alliances by supporting green activities through donations and promotional activities. Businesses engaging in this activity can use information about it to improve their image.
- Investing in the community. Investing in the green development of the local community is another dimension of green marketing. It allows

companies to appear in the public consciousness as benefactors and promoters of green ideas. Local community members are potential customers, employees and company cooperators.

A company can ecologise its products and overall activity by choosing from the four green strategies displayed in Figure 3.2.

The company has the following options to choose from (Figure 3.2):

- Lean greens do not publicise their green initiatives; they use them primarily to reduce costs and improve efficiency. They do not see opportunities to make significant money from green market segments. They are not always able to meet green standards, so they do not heavily promote their green behaviour, which is less impressive than that of their competitors. An example of such a strategy can be seen in the actions of Coca-Cola Co.
- Defensive Greens most often reactively use green marketing to respond to the actions of competitors. Green market segments are essential and profitable customer groups. They do not use aggressive promotion of greenness because they have no way to differentiate themselves from their competitors in terms of greenness. On a day-to-day basis, they take action by sponsoring less significant events and pro-environmental campaigns. They become more active if attacked by activists, regulators, or competitors. Gap Inc., which owns the Gap, Banana Republic, and Old Navy brands, can be considered an example of a defensive green.
- Shaded Greens make a significant financial and organisational commitment to long-term and system-wide environmental efforts. Shaded Greens primarily promote the direct tangible benefits they deliver to

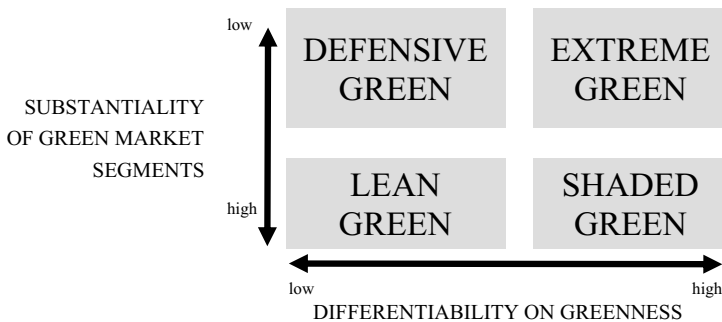


Figure 3.2 Green marketing strategies. Authors' own, based on (Ginsberg & Bloom, 2004)

customers and sell their products through primary channels. Ecological benefits are promoted as a secondary factor. This is because companies have the opportunity to truly differentiate themselves in terms of environmental performance, but they do not do so because it is more beneficial to emphasise other attributes. An example of a brand that can be considered shaded green is the Toyota Prius, which was initially advertised as a hybrid that saves fuel and time to fill up.

- Extreme Greens are companies in which environmental factors are fully integrated into their business processes and the lifecycles of their products. Examples of Extreme Greens are The Body Shop and Patagonia.

Green market orientation, defined as a company's philosophy and holistic disposition or orientation towards developing, communicating, and providing products and services with minimal negative environmental impacts (Afum et al., 2023), is growing in popularity. With the rise in popularity of green market orientation comes an increased awareness of the benefits of its implementation in practice. These are felt by individuals, businesses, and society (Figure 3.3).

Environmental education is making more and more people aware that a green marketing strategy is not only a benefit for companies. As a result of implementing these measures (Kiradoo, 2019), consumers receive a higher standard of living through holistic improvement of the environment and each

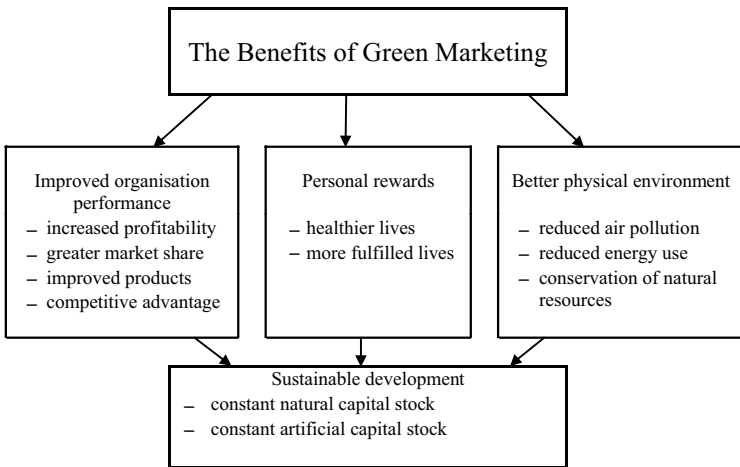


Figure 3.3 The benefits of green marketing.

Authors' own, based on (Kiradoo, 2019)

individual's situation (better physical health and moral well-being). The overall change leads to sustainable development.

Both within the educational framework of non-profit organisations and in the business dimension, the idea of popularising green marketing is mainly promoted using green advertising.

3.3 Green Advertising

A green reputation is environmental credibility attributed to a company by its stakeholders because of its past and present ecological actions (Rahman et al., 2015). It is an intangible value that is significant in influencing the attitudes of environmentally sensitive customers because it helps build a positive perception of a firm and gives it ecological appeal. Companies pursue this through green marketing and green advertising (Afum et al., 2023).

Green advertising is a marketing activity that simultaneously promotes attitudes and behaviour that consider environmental protection (Banerjee et al., 1995). Its origins can be traced back to 1970 (Borah et al., 2023). It emerged as a reaction to increasingly intense environmental problems that the public was taking an interest in. Contributing to the growing popularity of green marketing was public interest in the effects of events such as the Chernobyl nuclear explosion (1986; World Nuclear Association, n.d.) and the Exxon Valdez oil disaster (1989; ExxonMobil, n.d.; Verleye et al., 2023).

Green advertising includes, among other things, simple claims about environmentally friendly products, corporate images highlighting environmental credentials, and public events promoting ecological responsibilities (Hartmann & Apaolaza-Ibáñez, 2009). Two forms of advertising are the most common: advertisements based on consumer benefits (e.g. reduced spending) and appeals based on societal benefits (e.g. reduced air pollution levels) (Krstić et al., 2021). According to Chang et al., 2015, claims in green advertising can be framed in two ways: as a source of benefit (positive aspects of buying/consuming a product or behaving in a certain way) or as a warning of "loss of benefit" (negative consequences of not buying/consuming a product or behaving in a certain way). It is assumed that there are three categories of green advertising:

- advertisements related to the environment;
- advertisements related to green lifestyles;
- corporate advertisements related to environmental responsibility (Tiwari et al., 2011).

An eco-friendly (and ethical) approach to advertising enables consumers to develop intentions to make eco-friendly purchases (Ali et al., 2021). Socially sensitive consumers are more likely to act in favour of others by engaging in

environmentally friendly behaviour (Ali et al., 2021). This mechanism is used when building green advertising messages.

There is a strong belief among businesses that environmentally conscious customers are not price-sensitive. Thus, green manufacturing firms could charge a premium price for their products (Borah et al., 2023). Environmentally oriented companies have a favourable brand image, which increases their likelihood of market success (Shankar et al., 2009).

Initially, a lack of uniform regulations on environmental advertising standards caused some companies to periodically withdraw from using it, fearing, among other things, accusations of greenwashing. The market increasingly demanded regulation in this area. Successive regulations and guidelines showed how to use pro-environmental phrases. Among other things, they were required to be substantiated and make the basis for comparisons clear if comparisons are used (Carlson et al., 1993).

An analysis of environmental claims identified the main categories of these claims. Five types of environmental advertising claims were identified (Carlson et al., 1996; Neureiter & Matthes, 2023):

- Product orientation is when the message describes a product's environmentally friendly attributes. For example, a product may be shown to be biodegradable.
- Process orientation is when the claim demonstrates that the source of environmental benefits is the technology (or raw materials) used to make the product. The message may include information about clean manufacturing technologies or recycled raw materials.
- Image orientation shows links and associations with an activity with broad social support. In these messages, a commitment to human and environmental action for protecting endangered animal species or areas (tropical forests, ocean waters, etc.) is highlighted.
- Environmental facts. A prepared communication refers to the state of the environment. It shows negative changes that have taken place and require public attention.
- A combination of the above approaches.

Classically, some authors (Leonidou et al., 2011) omit the last category and mention only the first four types of environmental advertising claims.

It is increasingly observed today that the more interested a person is in environmental protection (educated on the subject), the more sceptical they will be about environmental claims made on packaging or in advertising (Do Paço & Reis, 2012). According to Coleman et al., 2011, some consumers enthusiastic about environmental protection are convinced that by avoiding the purchase of green products, they are ignoring false claims made in green advertisements and thus supporting the environmental community. This is,

unfortunately, a result of the misuse of green claims in the business space and the associated greenwashing.

However, according to Matthes and Wonneberger, 2014, environmentally conscious consumers find greater informational utility in green advertisements than non-environmentally conscious consumers. It has been noted (Parguel et al., 2015) that introducing so-called “executional greenwashing,” i.e. the use of elements evoking nature in advertisements to reinforce a brand’s green image artificially, generates perceptions of a brand as green and thus creates positive attitudes towards the brand. This indicates that there is a fine line between green advertising that will be positively perceived and advertising that does not inspire confidence.

A key issue for advertisers is advertising credibility, defined as the extent to which a consumer perceives the claims that are made about a company or product in an advertisement are truthful and believable (Leonidou et al., 2011; Ktisti et al., 2022). Six elements can enhance the credibility of green advertising:

- Honesty: the honesty of the message and its sender is a fundamental factor affecting the credibility of the entire advertisement.
- Clarity of an advertising message: the promises made should be as concrete and tangible as possible.
- Details: information that is publicly accessible and available to those who wish to consult it.
- Commitment: many consumers expect a commitment to sustainability by producers; consumers judge those offering goods better when they observe such attitudes.
- Urgency: achieving longer-term aims is only possible by taking action today.
- Shared value: consumers expect a company’s actions, especially those covered by advertising messages, to be primarily the result of pursuing pro-environmental aims, not just financial ones. (Verleye et al., 2023)

3.3 Greenwashing Advertising

Changing public opinion is a key function of advertising (Vakratsas & Ambler, 1999). This encourages some companies to publish false or misleading messages to build a green corporate image, especially in the face of environmental pressure from stakeholders. This phenomenon is called greenwashed (greenwashing) advertising, and the messages used are called deceptive claims.

The most general categorisation of deceptive claims is to distinguish between false appeals, i.e. unequivocally false claims, and vague appeals, which are too broadly or vaguely worded (D. Schmuck et al., 2018). Other authors (Carlson et al., 1993); Neureiter & Matthes, 2023) are more specific

and distinguish the following misleading/deceptive categories of environmental advertising claims (Prasad et al., 2017):

- Vague/Ambiguous: the claim is ambiguous; it contains a phrase or statement that is too broad to have a clear meaning.
- Omission: the claim omits essential information necessary to evaluate its truthfulness or reasonableness.
- False/Outright Lying: the claim is inaccurate or a fabrication.
- Combination: the claim contains a combination (more than one) of the above actions.

As consumer awareness of environmental issues increases, advertisement creators must be more committed to crafting persuasive messages for their audiences (Oke et al., 2020). This is why there are more and more omission claims. For example, a category of so-called compensation claims, advertising green compensation measures for flying, has emerged in the advertising of airlines (which, with the increasingly high carbon footprint of flying, have a green image problem). All that appears is information about offsetting the CO₂ produced during a (Neureiter & Matthes, 2023). However, no information exists about how much carbon one flight produces and how much carbon can be compensated for with the promoted measures (In & Schumacher, 2021). The following distinction is made:

- abstract compensation claims – declaring future environmental compensation for the negative environmental impacts of aircraft flights (e.g. tree planting),
- concrete compensation claims – forms of compensation are directly experienced and observed by consumers (using eco-friendly crockery and cutlery during the flight, which are later recycled) (Neureiter & Matthes, 2023).

In the literature, the term “advertising greenness” describes the level of environmental information included in advertisements. Initially, the following categories were used to analyse the level of greenness: shallow, moderate and deep (Banerjee et al., 1995). Later, this classification was expanded to five dimensions (Wagner & Hansen, 2002; Grillo et al., 2008). Further research found that shallow or moderate greenness claims are perceived as less credible. Advertisements containing deep environmental claims, on the other hand, are characterised by higher effectiveness.

From the point of view of the effectiveness of greenwashing advertisements, an important issue is consumers detecting greenwashing intentions in claims. This consumer ability is called “greenwashing perceptions.” The occurrence of greenwashing perceptions depends on the capacity and

cognitive engagement of the addressees of messages. It can be powerful in the case of vague claims when consumers have to compare their opinions about products with the image generated by a vague generic message.

3.4 The Practice of Greenwashing Advertising

Greenwashing in advertising is identified in the activities of various companies, industries and markets. It is difficult to compare them with each other and assess their social harm, as it is impossible to unequivocally determine the impact of these activities first on consumers' market decisions and ultimately on the surrounding reality. One parameter for assessing actions of this type is the penalties and/or costs of court settlements for greenwashing. Table 3.1 lists some of the most serious (most significant financial penalties) for greenwashing.

One of the highest and most notorious penalties for greenwashing was the case of Volkswagen (Table 3.1), which used software in its cars that hid the greenhouse gas emissions of its cars. As part of what is known as

Table 3.1 Some of the most significant fines (and financial settlements) for greenwashing (CleanHub, n.d.).

| <i>Brand name</i> | <i>Amount of Penalty*</i> | <i>Reason for Penalty</i> |
|-----------------------|---------------------------|--|
| 1. Volkswagen | \$34.69 billion | Installation of software that falsified data and helped avoid vehicle emission tests. |
| 2. Toyota | \$180 million | Delayed release of emission reports. |
| 3. DWS | \$25 million | Potentially promoting ESG funds as "greener" than they really are. |
| 4. Eni | \$5.6 million | Claiming that palm oil produced by the company is "green." |
| 5. Kohl's and Walmart | \$5.5 million (total) | Both companies claimed that their products were made from environmentally friendly bamboo, when in fact they were made from other materials. |
| 6. Goldman Sachs | \$4 million | Failure to comply with ESG investment rules and misleading clients. |
| 7. Keurig | \$2.2 million | Misrepresenting disposable coffee capsules by suggesting they were recyclable when recyclers did not always want to recycle them. |
| 8. BNY Mellon | \$1.5 million | Failing to implement ESG policies and overstating the ESG value of funds. |
| 9. H&M and Decathlon | \$430.5k and \$530k | Putting unsupported claims on labels. |

*To maintain consistency of information, each value has been converted into US dollars.

“Dieselgate,” Volkswagen was caught manipulating emissions tests on its diesel cars, leading to significant misrepresentations of nitrogen oxide emissions. Volkswagen vehicles reportedly emitted 40 times more nitrogen oxide than US law allows. The amount listed in the table covered the fines for this practice and the cost of recalling cars equipped with this software. Eleven million cars were involved worldwide (BBC News, 2015).

In second place on the list is Toyota, which, between 2005 and 2015, failed to report defects in the emissions levels of its vehicles and failed to report progress on recalls of vehicles that did not meet existing standards. Toyota was accused of systematic and prolonged violations of the rules under which potential defects and service actions affecting vehicle emissions should be reported. The manufacturer failed to report potential emission control problems, hid this knowledge from federal authorities, and solved any problems on its own. This may sound like a not-so-harmful action, but the government’s legal representative said that it may have allowed Toyota to delay or avoid implementing regulations to repair/withdraw products from the market. Thus, the company may have benefited financially from the fact that the authorities were unaware of it (potentially) exceeding emissions standards. Higher air pollution may also have been a direct result of these actions (BBC News, 2025).

The third brand on the list (DWS Group) was fined by the US Securities and Exchange Commission for failing to implement ESG policies. DWS made materially misleading statements about its controls for incorporating ESG factors in research and investment recommendations for ESG-integrated products, including particular actively managed mutual funds and separately managed accounts. DWS Group, the asset manager of Deutsche Bank, had to pay the highest fine in Europe (by April 2025) for greenwashing in advertising (ESG Today, 2025). The fine amounts to €25 million (\$27 million). An investigation by the public prosecutor’s office and the police found that the company’s published claims that it was a “leader in the ESG area” and that “ESG is an integral part of its DNA” did not correspond to reality. Earlier in 2023, DWS Group was also fined by financial regulators in the United States for misleading green statements. The fine at the time amounted to \$19 million. The DWS Group scandal was first made public in 2021. At the time, former sustainability director Desiree Fixler accused her employer of greenwashing. As a result, Asoka Woehrmann resigned as CEO of the DWS group in 2022.

Next in the ranking are advertising “green fuel,” counterfeiting bamboo products and lying about the recyclability of coffee capsules. The activities listed concern relatively narrow areas of operation and do not translate into negative evaluations of other areas of the companies’ operations. However, the above facts and the associated penalties were heavily commented on. They significantly damaged the images of the brands that were the negative protagonists of these events. The very idea of green marketing also lost ground in terms of image. After such experiences, customers often approach

“green” initiatives by entrepreneurs with disbelief. Greenwashing is a reason for a notable consumer trust issue: customers face challenges distinguishing green claims from greenwashing ones.

Accusations of greenwashing levelled against advertising creators and broadcasters do not always end in such spectacular trials and fines. On a day-to-day basis, individual campaigns are subject to scrutiny by national organisations and authorities that monitor advertising standards. The institutions mentioned carry out independent inspections and respond to complaints from individual market players.

One example of the Advertising Standards Authority (ASA) successfully intervening was when it forced HSBC to change the advertising slogan used in a campaign. Two HSBC posters were found to be greenwashing (FS Tech, 2022). They could be seen in 2021 on bus stops in London and Bristol. They depicted HSBC as a brand that cares about the environment. The first poster carried the slogan “Climate change doesn’t do borders. Neither do rising sea levels. That’s why HSBC aims to provide up to \$1 trillion in financing and investment globally to help our clients transition to net zero.” The second caption read “Climate change doesn’t do borders. So in the UK, we’re helping to plant 2 million trees, which will lock in 1.25 million tonnes of carbon over their lifetime.” The ASA received 45 complaints on this issue. They questioned, among other things, the veracity of HSBC’s claims, showing that the adverts omitted important information about HSBC’s contribution to carbon and greenhouse gas emissions. In a statement, the ASA questioned whether consumers would understand the complexities involved in a move to climate neutrality by an organisation involved in financing companies that contributed significantly to carbon dioxide and other greenhouse gas emissions.

Even Starbucks (Starbucks Poland, n.d.), which has a strong commitment to sustainability, has not avoided accusations of greenwashing. The brand was very proud of having eliminated plastic drinking straws and was giving customers the option of using their own reusable cups when ordering coffee in its outlets. However, careful observers noticed that the straws were replaced with lids which contain even more plastic than the straws. Starbucks also still relies heavily on disposable plastic cups. It partly ignores the fact that coffee production is resource-intensive, requires large amounts of water, contributes to deforestation, and that coffee transport has a high carbon footprint. The company’s efforts to sustainably source coffee beans are not extensive. Starbucks’ sustainability goals for 2030 are very ambitious, and there is no certainty that the brand will be able to completely move away from harmful practices such as single-use plastics and the high carbon emissions associated with coffee production. The scale of Starbucks and its business model, which focuses on global expansion and convenience, is often at odds with its sustainability message. Starbucks appears to be somewhere between greenwashing and real change. Sustainability efforts are evident, but there are still areas in

the company's strategy that are not covered. Starbucks seems to be balancing between greenwashing, greenwashing, and greenhushing.

The company's ambitious aims for 2030 are greenwashing – wanting to be more sustainable, but without enough ongoing action. The brand often avoids addressing the full scope of its environmental challenges, as if downplaying the true scale of the issues at hand. This can be described as greenhushing. Ultimately, Starbucks' sustainability efforts have potential, but they fall slightly short of being able to be considered fully green.

The above examples of greenwashing are not the only ones. Discussions assessing the sustainability activities of companies are increasingly appearing in the public space. And criticism of greenwashing is being taken more and more seriously. The number of climate-related lawsuits against companies is also on the rise. According to the Grantham Research Institute on Climate Change and the Environment (London School of Economics and Political Science, n.d.), 230 climate-related lawsuits have been filed against companies and trade associations since 2015. More than two-thirds of these lawsuits have been filed since 2020. In 2023 alone, 47 climate and greenwashing lawsuits were filed against corporations and trade associations. Of the 140 cases analysed between 2016 and 2023, 77 ended in official decisions, of which 54 were decided in favour of the plaintiffs, i.e. the accusers of greenwashing.

3.5 Greenwashing Advertising from the Perspective of Message Recipients

The environmental awareness of societies is growing and more and more people are opting for zero waste (Chai et al., 2025), the 5R principle (Refuse, Reduce, Reuse, Recycle, Rot) (Setyaningsih et al., 2023; Ahmad & Hendrasarie, 2023), a circular economy (Muzamwese, 2025), and environmental protection in a broad sense (Proszowska et al., 2024). Current legal rules, including industry rules, explicitly prohibit greenwashing practices, including ones that may constitute unfair competition. However, the burden of proving greenwashing still lies with external stakeholders, in particular, consumers and the media. Consumers react to greenwashing in advertising with a mixed combination of scepticism, frustration and disappointment, which leads to a loss of trust in companies and negative perceptions of their brands. Specific consumer reactions to greenwashing include (Singh et al., 2022; Teichmann et al., 2023):

- Scepticism. As interactions with greenwashed deceptive claims increase, consumers become increasingly cautious and sceptical of any messages about green aspects of market offers they encounter. This results in a lack of receptivity to actions that have a genuinely positive impact on the environment (Golob et al., 2018; Leonidou et al., 2011).

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- Frustration and disappointment. Encouraged to act in a particular way by misleading communications, consumers make decisions in the belief that they are sustainable. They invest their time and money in green choices. On discovering that they have been manipulated, they feel very disappointed and let down. They lose the feeling that they can make the right decisions (Torelli et al., 2020).
- Loss of trust. All senders of communications that have misled consumers face a loss of trust. Customers will be wary of any information they receive from a company. As a result, they will not feel loyal to a brand that has failed their trust.
- Negative impacts on purchasing decisions. Products that have been advertised using greenwashing will be less likely to be purchased by customers for whom green values are important.
- Undermined faith in the effectiveness of environmental action. Further messages and advertising campaigns using greenwashing arguments will be seen as potentially false. Negative experiences in this area may discourage consumers from taking any action in favour of the environment.

To really avoid buying products or services pretending to be organic, customers need to:

- check labels and certificates and verify their accuracy;
- check independent information based on scientific studies, environmental reports and opinions of real experts;
- beware of overgeneralised and imprecise phrases such as “ecological,” “green,” and “environmentally friendly,” which often act as “buzz words”;
- analyse companies’ past environmental activities and behaviour.

Research shows that the term greenwashing is becoming more and more understood by the public. For example, in the sixth edition of the Ecobarometer report (SW Research, 2024), the percentage of correct answers to the question “What does the term greenwashing mean?” reached a record high of 35% – the highest ever measured to date. Almost half the respondents to this survey (48%) noted that advertisements today are full of unnecessary green content. Nearly seven in ten consumers (68%) support the view that green slogans are only used for promotional purposes. Around two-thirds (63%) agree that most brands treat green activities as only image-enhancing activities, and almost six in ten consumers (58%) complain that companies overuse “green” in their marketing campaigns. That is, consumers are aware that the activities described are primarily manipulated to influence consumer decisions. Concern for the climate, the environment and other endangered areas is often second nature to businesses (Dardanoni & Guerriero, 2021).

However, despite growing consumer awareness, one in two respondents had difficulty in accurately distinguishing between greenwashing and sound marketing or product communication. In addition, Schmuck et al. (2018) find that vague environmental claims are not perceived as greenwashing and can even have a positive impact on attitudes, in contrast to false claims that are identified as greenwashing and worsen attitudes to advertisements and brands.

There is a willingness among consumers to educate themselves about the environment and to increase their level of pro-environmental awareness (Fernandes et al., 2020). Most consumers (56%) declare that environmental and social certifications and labels on packaging are essential for them.

Furthermore, quality certification and packaging material are among the four key factors when choosing between products that differ neither in quality nor price. One in two consumers (53%) confirms that if they have the opportunity (e.g. the product is available and they have the means), they are more likely to go for a bio-certified product. Only 17% of consumers say that they ignore whether the products that go into their shopping baskets when shopping have organic labelling, e.g. organic production, non-GMO, and information about whether the product is organic or vegan. One in four consumers surveyed (24%) admits that such labels are on most of the products they buy.

It is challenging for consumers to identify so-called “organic” labels. There are many of them, and they usually concern single product characteristics and are issued by independent associations, often of a local nature. In many cases, different labels convey similar product information in other regions of the world (some examples of eco-labels are described in Chapter 4). Eco-labels help consumers to make responsible decisions. Unfortunately, due to the significant number of them, it is very difficult to identify them and to distinguish them from other labels created by individual entrepreneurs or associations to mislead stakeholders (P. Kumar et al., 2021).

3.6 Conclusions

The search for ways to eliminate greenwashed (greenwashing) advertising is a process that is still a long way from being completed. However, the commitment of international institutions and pro-environmental organisations to educate societies in the creation of regulations and guidelines defining what green advertising should look like allows us to believe that the situation will improve. But “towards green advertising” is a journey that will not end soon. It is important to remember that, at the same time as there are efforts to strengthen environmental action, campaigns by global corporations seeking profit to the exclusion of social well-being are being developed.

Note

- 1 The determinants of the development of sustainable consumption and sustainability are presented in more detail in Chapter 1.

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