

THE PHENOMENON OF GREENWASHING AND ITS IMPACT ON THE PERCEPTION AND REALITY OF FOOD SAFETY

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Abstract: Greenwashing is the practice of making false or exaggerated claims about a product, service, or company to make it appear more environmentally friendly than it actually is. The term "greenwashing" comes from combining the words "green" (associated with environmentalism) and "whitewashing" (which means to cover up or hide something negative).

The first clear examples of greenwashing appeared in the 1960s in the US. One example is the campaign by a hotel chain which, under the pretext of protecting the environment by saving water, asked guests to reuse their towels. In reality, the aim was to reduce laundry costs. In the 1980s, the term "greenwashing" entered public and media usage for good.

Green markets, logos, and packaging are widespread. Many experts point out that these may just be a marketing ploy, suggesting that what is "green" is automatically "natural." However, not all companies that use such symbols can be accused of greenwashing. The main problem is the difficulty consumers have in distinguishing between a manufacturer with genuine sustainability practices and one that only pretends to comply with them.

A study conducted in the Netherlands shows that the price of sustainable products is, on average, 75–85% higher than that of similar products without certification, which amplifies consumer scepticism and suspicion.

To avoid confusion and protect consumers, there are a number of safety standards and certifications in the food sector, including: ISO 22000:2018 – applicable to all companies in the food sector, from production and distribution to storage and serving; ISO 9001:2015 – focused on organizational process management and customer satisfaction; SQF Standard – focused on product quality and food safety.

The certifications obtained by organizations demonstrate that their products comply with the international standards required in the field.

There are two bodies in the Republic of Moldova that inspect and certify agricultural products as organic: Certificat-Eco LLC and Control Union Dnjestr LLC. The list of certified farmers can be found on the website of the Ministry of Agriculture and Food Industry. However, holding an ecological certificate does not yet give Moldovan producers the right to apply a special ecological label on their packaging. This possibility will be regulated by a law that is due to come into force in April. Currently, only imported products on store shelves in the Republic of Moldova have organic labels.

Keywords: greenwashing, food safety, consumer perception, corporate responsibility

JEL Classification: M14, M31, Q18, D18, Q56.

Introduction

Eco-friendly practices are used not only by ordinary people, but also by large clothing and food companies. Manufacturers are increasingly trying to meet modern popular standards of business management. And one of the most important conditions influencing the purchase of one

product or another is sustainable development in the approach to business, the "greening" of production and distribution processes. (Widya Satya Nugraha, 2024)

But there are two options here: either the organization truly adheres to a conscious attitude towards natural resources, or it is all just a marketing ploy aimed at increasing sales without bringing any benefit to the environment. This phenomenon is called greenwashing, which is the complete opposite of eco-marketing.

Greenwashing is not real ecology, but pseudo-ecology. It is about how companies mislead consumers and cover up their actions with seemingly rational consumption.

Research methodology

American ecologist Jay Westerveld introduced the term greenwashing in 1986, defining it as the practice of falsely or exaggeratedly presenting an organization's environmental performance. However, the origins of the phenomenon can be traced back to the first half of the 20th century, with the advent of television advertising and the campaigns of the Keep America Beautiful organization. Westerveld repeatedly criticized misleading corporate communication strategies, through which companies misled consumers about the real environmental impact of their products or activities. (Widya Satya Nugraha, 2024)

The term greenwashing comes from English and has no perfect equivalent in other languages. By analogy with the term whitewashing ("covering up the truth"), it can be translated as "greenwashing" or "eco-camouflage," expressing the idea of pseudo-ecologization intended to create an artificial image of sustainability. In the literature, the concept is also referred to as "ecological camouflage" or "pseudo-ecologization."

According to the research report *The Sins of Greenwashing*, compiled by UL in 2010, the number of products claiming to be environmentally friendly increased by approximately 73% compared to the previous year. The study identified the so-called "seven sins of greenwashing," defined as deceptive marketing strategies used by companies:

1. the sin of hiding essential attributes;
2. the sin of lack of empirical evidence;
3. the sin of irrelevance;
4. the sin of false labeling;
5. the sin of selective comparison ("the lesser of two evils");
6. the sin of conceptual inconsistency;
7. the sin of outright lying.

These forms of communicative manipulation reflect the dissonance between the promoted ecological image and the reality of environmental impact, constituting a significant obstacle to building consumer trust and implementing genuine corporate sustainability practices. In marketing, greenwashing is used to draw attention to a brand and strengthen consumer loyalty to it. Greenwashing is most commonly used in the fast-moving consumer goods (FMCG) sector, but manufacturers of cosmetics, clothing, footwear and pharmaceuticals also like to 'ride the green wave'. (Widya Satya Nugraha, 2024)

In most cases, product packaging is used to 'greenwash' the image. This can literally mean green labels, but also product features related to ecology, which do not, however, correspond to the actual composition. These include, for example, 'plant-based raw materials', 'heavy metal-free', 'palm oil-free' and 'GMO-free'. Some manufacturers go even further and affix fake eco-certificates to their packaging. Information on the recyclability of packaging may also be false.

Another objective of greenwashing is to attract employees to the company. For many workers, especially those of Generation Z, it is important that their employer is environmentally responsible. Young people prefer to work in 'green' offices and choose companies that care about the environment. (Nations)

Research results

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Many brands today want to be environmentally friendly. And it's understandable: more and more buyers are paying attention to the impact of the products they buy on their health and the environment. However, not all products that call themselves "green" are actually so. Sometimes, their manufacturers just make big promises. This is called "greenwashing." We will explain what it is and how to recognize it.

Greenwashing is a marketing technique used by some companies to create the impression that their products or services are environmentally friendly, when in reality they are not. Greenwashing can take many forms, such as using the color green, nature symbols, words like "eco," "bio," "organic," etc. on packaging or in advertisements, exaggerating or making false claims about their environmental achievements or awards. Another example of greenwashing by a brand is hiding or ignoring its negative impact on the environment.

Not long ago, a Korean cosmetics brand was caught in a primitive greenwashing campaign, claiming to have launched a line of products in handmade paper packaging. The first attentive buyer easily discovered the deception. The paper was indeed present in the packaging, but it was simply carefully glued to a regular plastic container. The shame was so great that the product range was completely withdrawn by the manufacturer. (Widya Satya Nugraha, 2024)

But this is probably the most obvious example of greenwashing for consumers. A less obvious example is when the packaging says "ECO," "BIO," or "100% less plastic" in large letters. In this case, it is very difficult for consumers to understand where the lie is and where the truth is. Many are misled by the trendy color. And finally, the disposable coffee cup, painted in "artisanal brown," is considered paper and recyclable. Although, in fact, it is a composite packaging, containing the same disposable and non-recyclable plastic.

Large companies have also been involved in greenwashing scandals. For example, Starbucks once declared that it was giving up plastic straws in its drinks to reduce plastic use. However, it turned out that the new cup lids it introduced contained more plastic than the old lids and straws combined. The company tried to justify this by saying that the new lids are easier to recycle, but in fact, only a small proportion of the lids were recycled.

To date, the case of H&M, which launched a program several years ago to collect and recycle old clothes, promising that they would be used to create new items, is still in the public eye. However, journalists discovered that most of the clothes collected were simply sold on the secondary market in second-hand stores, and some were simply thrown away. (Widya Satya Nugraha, 2024)

There are several dangers associated with greenwashing:

First, it misleads consumers who trust the company's green image and are unaware of its actual practices. As a result, they buy products that may be harmful to their health, animals, plants, water, soil, and the atmosphere.

Second, greenwashing reduces consumers' motivation to adopt environmentally responsible behavior, such as sorting waste, saving resources, and reducing consumption. This is because consumers believe that by buying "green" products, they are already doing a lot to protect the environment.

Thirdly, greenwashing creates unequal competition in the market, as honest and truly eco-friendly companies cannot compete with those that use the "green mask" to attract customers. Thus, greenwashing undermines the development of a truly eco-friendly economy and innovations.

In the Republic of Moldova, the organic certification system for agricultural products is managed by two accredited entities – Certificat-Eco SRL and Control Union Dnjestr SRL. These organizations are responsible for assessing the compliance of production processes with organic farming standards and issuing the corresponding certificates. The complete list of certified

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producers is publicly available on the official website of the Ministry of Agriculture and Food Industry, which ensures transparency and free access to information for consumers.

However, obtaining an organic certificate does not currently entitle producers to use an organic label on the packaging of local products. The implementation of the regulatory framework that will allow the use of this label is planned for April, which will mark an important step in aligning the national system with European certification and labeling practices. As a result, only imported products bearing internationally recognized eco-labels are currently available on the domestic market, confirming their certification in accordance with European regulations in force. (Nations, n.d.) (Widya Satya Nugraha, 2024)

International eco-labels and ethical certification labels

In the context of market globalization and growing concerns about sustainability, international eco-labels are essential tools for ensuring that products comply with the principles of sustainable development. They confirm that manufacturers adhere to rigorous standards of environmental protection, human rights, and economic fairness, giving consumers the assurance of a responsible and ethical choice. Below are the main legitimate international labels, recognized worldwide, which enhance the transparency of supply chains and contribute to the creation of sustainable and fair trade.



Climate Neutral Certified

This label confirms that the certified organization has implemented concrete measures to reduce and offset the carbon emissions generated by its activities. The certification process involves, in the first phase, a comprehensive assessment of the carbon footprint associated with production, transport, and distribution processes. Subsequently, the company is required to purchase verified carbon credits, each representing the avoidance of one ton of carbon dioxide emitted into the atmosphere. The funds obtained from these credits support initiatives for forest conservation, renewable energy development, and the modernization of green transportation, thus contributing to the reduction of global climate impact. (Certified, 2024)



Leaping Bunny (Cruelty-Free Certification)

The Leaping Bunny label guarantees that the product has not been tested on animals at any stage of the development process. Companies that obtain this certification make an annual commitment to permanently renounce animal testing and accept independent audits. Therefore, this label reflects a solid ethical policy in the field of cosmetic research and production, being a recognized symbol of responsibility towards animal life. (Certification), 2025)



GOTS – Global Organic Textile Standard

GOTS certification sets international standards for organic textiles, covering the entire product life cycle—from raw material harvesting to environmentally and socially responsible processing to final labeling. Products bearing this certification guarantee a high level of

sustainability and traceability, giving consumers confidence that their purchase supports a clean, ethical, and transparent production process. (Standard, 2025)



Rainforest Alliance Certified

This label certifies products sourced from sources that comply with the three fundamental pillars of sustainability: social, economic, and environmental. Assessments are carried out by independent bodies, which verify fair labor practices, biodiversity protection, and rational management of natural resources. By promoting this certification, producers contribute to the conservation of tropical ecosystems and the improvement of living conditions for rural communities in producing regions. (Certified R. A., 2025)



The Vegan Society Trademark

The Vegan Society label certifies products that do not contain ingredients of animal origin and do not involve the exploitation of animals at any stage of production. This internationally recognized label promotes a sustainable lifestyle and an ethical approach to consumption, in full accordance with the principles of environmental protection and animal welfare. (Trademark, 2025)



6. Fairtrade Certification

The Fairtrade label is a symbol of fair trade and respect for human dignity. It guarantees that raw materials—such as cocoa, coffee, or sugar—come from supply chains that adhere to the principles of non-discrimination, fair remuneration, elimination of child labor, and occupational safety. Fairtrade-certified products contribute to the sustainable development of farming communities in developing countries by offering farmers fair prices and decent working conditions. (Certification, 2025)

Development of a sustainable finance taxonomy

Plans to develop a sustainable finance taxonomy in Moldova include the introduction of modern tools for investment management and the allocation of capital to green projects. The project, launched by the National Bank of Moldova (BNM) with the support of the International Finance Corporation (IFC), aims to create a classification system defining environmentally sustainable activities. This system will take into account criteria such as emissions reduction, environmental protection and efficient use of resources. (Moldova, n.d.)

The taxonomy serves as a tool to prevent greenwashing: clearly defined criteria will make it possible to exclude cases where financial products or projects are declared ‘green’ without any real basis. The sustainable finance project provides for consultations with representatives of the NBM, the National Financial Markets Commission and relevant ministries, laying the foundations for transparent regulation and strengthening investor confidence. (Moldova, n.d.)

Development of an internal management infrastructure

Effective implementation of the taxonomy requires a solid ‘infrastructure’: the creation of an expert council, the drafting of regulatory texts and the systematic adaptation of criteria to local conditions. An advisory group composed of representatives from the government, regulators and the banking sector discusses the classification of sectors, evaluation criteria and audit procedures.

The next step will be to prepare a normative act and submit it for public debate, allowing stakeholders to propose amendments and improvements. This approach offers flexibility and ensures that the rules will be in line with international standards for sustainable finance. (Moldova, n.d.)

Interaction with customers and partners

Consumer and partner confidence in companies' environmental claims increases when information is backed up by evidence and accessible to all. CPR.md documents show that greenwashing often results in a lack of evidence or unconfirmed “vegan” and “eco” claims. (ecologică?, n.d.) It is important for companies to implement transparent processes for confirming environmental benefits and to give customers access to certificates and audit results.

In addition, vague terms such as ‘natural’ and “ecological” must be abandoned, and data on the actual environmental characteristics of the product must be made accessible. Taxonomy standards can be integrated into investor relations: companies are required to disclose which parts of their activities are classified as ‘sustainable’ and why.

Automation of controls and reporting

To combat greenwashing, it is necessary to automate control processes. This involves creating a single register of projects classified according to the taxonomy and an electronic monitoring system that allows the regulatory authority to quickly detect non-compliance. Companies can implement ERP systems to integrate data on emissions, resource consumption and compliance with environmental standards.

The CPR.md documents point out that many sustainability claims are not backed up by evidence, which is why automatic control mechanisms and constant updating of information can reduce the risk of manipulation. (ecologică?, n.d.)

Regulatory security and data protection

The implementation of a new taxonomy and anti-greenwashing approaches must be accompanied by the development of both legal and technical protection mechanisms. An article by CPR.md describes greenwashing as a form of unfair competition that infringes on consumer rights. This requires the introduction of laws regulating the use of environmental claims and penalties for false claims.

Regulators are required to ensure that data relating to sustainable financing projects is kept in accordance with confidentiality rules and is only disclosed to confirm environmental status. The adoption of European regulations, in particular the Unfair Commercial Practices Directive (2005/29/EC), will provide an additional tool for consumer protection.

Skills development and awareness raising

It is impossible to combat greenwashing effectively without raising awareness among employees and the public. CPR.md recommends developing official guidelines on green advertising and greenwashing, which will explain the meaning of the terms, give examples of permitted and prohibited practices, and list the criteria for evaluating environmental claims [9]. Companies can organise training programmes for marketing specialists, legal professionals and sustainability managers. These programmes should cover international standards, data verification methods and how to communicate effectively with customers.

Communication and commercial reputation

A company's green image must be based on actual practices, not artificial claims. The use of vague wording and images of nature without factual confirmation is a common technique of greenwashing. (ecologică?, n.d.) To strengthen their reputation, companies must be transparent,

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back up their claims with certifications (e.g. Climate Neutral Certified, Fairtrade) and publish reports on the work they have done.

From the perspective of central banks and public authorities, it is important to develop a communication strategy that explains the nature of the taxonomy to the public, describes its benefits and encourages companies to adopt sustainable business models.

Financing and support for sustainable development projects

Like any modernization process, the implementation of the taxonomy will require financial resources. Possible sources of funding include international programmes (IFC, EBRD), European subsidies for sustainable development and support programmes for small and medium-sized enterprises. It is important to develop a business plan and a cost-benefit assessment to justify investments in accounting systems, staff training and certification.

Monitoring and evaluation of implementation

To ensure the system functions properly, its effectiveness must be continuously monitored and evaluated. Indicators may include:

- percentage of projects classified as sustainable;
- number of cases of non-compliance with the identified criteria;
- level of confidence among investors and consumers;
- economic benefits of applying the taxonomy;
- changes in the volume of funding for environmental projects.

Regular collection and analysis of this data will enable policies to be adjusted and ensure compliance with best practices in sustainable financing and the fight against greenwashing.

Conclusion

Greenwashing is pseudo-ecological advertising described by Jay Westerfeld as early as 1986. It is based on ‘seven sins’: lack of evidence, inappropriate statements, misleading eco-labels, selective mention of benefits and outright lies. Manufacturers often use green colours, the words ‘natural’ or ‘organic’ and even fake certificates, without having a genuine ecological approach. Scandals involving ‘paper’ packaging that turned out to be plastic, the replacement of Starbucks straws with more plastic lids, and H&M's ‘eco-friendly’ programmes have shown that such actions often mislead consumers. This practice creates dangers. Firstly, it deceives buyers and can conceal risks to health and the environment. Secondly, they reduce interest in truly responsible behaviour, as people think they are buying “organic” and doing enough. Thirdly, they lead to unfair competition: dishonest companies hide their real costs, thereby driving out honest manufacturers.

In Moldova, the situation is complicated by the fact that local producers who have obtained organic certificates cannot yet display the eco-label on their packaging: the relevant legislation is still being drafted. The market is therefore dominated by imported products bearing international labels: Climate Neutral, Leaping Bunny, GOTS, Rainforest Alliance, Vegan Society, Fairtrade.

Serious measures are needed to combat greenwashing. Safefood notes that there are no direct risks to product safety, but that consumer confidence has been shaken.

The European Union is already drafting a directive requiring environmental claims to be verified by independent audits, with penalties for companies that fail to comply. In Moldova, the National Bank, in collaboration with the IFC, is developing a sustainable finance taxonomy to steer investment towards genuine green projects and weed out fake ones.

Consumers should rely on recognised certificates, read product labels and not believe slogans. For companies, it is important to move from decoration to concrete ecological actions: reducing emissions, using circular technologies and communicating honestly about this. This is the only way to build trust and prevent greenwashing from destroying the market for sustainable products.

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