

## GREENWASHING – CONSUMER’S PERSPECTIVE

Ewa MAZUR-WIERZBICKA

University of Szczecin; ewa.mazur-wierzbicka@usz.edu.pl, ORCID: 0000-0001-7874-6417

**Purpose:** The purpose of this study is to identify and assess the occurrence of greenwashing from the perspective of the company’ main external stakeholder, that is consumer.

**Design/methodology/approach:** The paper is based on a critical review of literature, research studies, secondary data and reports.

**Findings:** The discussion carried out in this article showed that consumer pressure is one of the main reasons why organizations apply both real and apparent (greenwashing practices) actions that serve to protect the natural environment. Greenwashing practices used by companies for whom consumers are the main recipients are not to their benefit in the long run (which some of the consumers do not realise). As consumers’ ecological knowledge and awareness improve, we may hope that greenwashing practices will become scarcer. This trend may benefit from placing a greater emphasis (for example coming from the legislator) on the processes of sustainable production and consumption.

**Research limitations/implications:** This paper includes a discussion based on a critical analysis of relevant literature and existing secondary data, which is its limitation. Due to the significance and validity of the subject matter discussed in the article, it seems important to take another step, that is a discussion on the impact of sustainable consumption on the development of greenwashing practices.

**Practical implications:** The study identifies how important it is to be able to recognize greenwashing. It is because greenwashing is detrimental not only to consumers, but also to honest companies that treat the issues of environmental protection and sustainable development seriously.

**Social implications:** The argumentation presented in the article points to the dangerous phenomenon of greenwashing. It is alarming because it gives the consumer an “ecological” product, a sense of satisfaction and involvement in environmental protection, whereas the use of greenwashing practices (e.g. overrating, false information) reinforces the social sense of mistrust and ignorance towards products and companies that take real environmental efforts. It is suggested that awareness-raising measures (e.g. campaigns) be undertaken so that consumers are more conscious of greenwashing practices and the resulting negative consequences.

**Originality/value:** Showing the role of the consumer as an external shareholder from the point of view of an initiator and recipient of pro-ecological actions taken up by organizations (unfortunately also greenwashing practices), directed at creating environmentally-friendly (pro-ecological) products.

**Keywords:** greenwashing, natural environment, consumer, stakeholder.

**Category of the paper:** research paper.

## 1. Introduction

Companies are increasingly aware of the fact that their “environmental reputation”, an environmentally-friendly attitude and care about environmental protection do have an impact on their products being purchased. This is also encouraged by the noticeable trend for a dynamic development of the market of ecological products (the value of the global ecological food market in 2019 was more than EUR 106 billion). Consumer awareness of environmental protection also rises, which may be seen in market choices, for example in the increased demand for ecological products (Nguyen et al., 2020) and in the changes in behaviour models and values (Kim, Chung, 2011). Eco-friendly products are preferred due their marginal or no direct negative and/or indirect impact on the natural environment during their entire life cycle (Choi, Johnson, 2019). Also, they are increasingly associated with prestige and a desired status (Ahmad, Zhang, 2020).

Unfortunately, some companies use this increased interest in environmental protection (being “eco” is becoming more and more fashionable and politically correct) and offer goods that are classified as eco-friendly. Companies communicate their affirmed care about the natural environment, which in some cases is fake and superficial and used to satisfy the companies’ sale- and marketing-related needs. Sometimes it is just a financial calculation and conscious consumer manipulation.

This is why more and more place in the public debate is devoted to greenwashing (Dahl, 2010), which has many forms but one objective - the company is to be seen as environmentally friendly even though it is not truly the case.

Given the above, the author’s objective in this study is to identify and assess the occurrence of greenwashing from the perspective of the company’ main external stakeholder, that is consumer. The prime goal was achieved through the formulation of an adequate model.

## 2. Greenwashing - theoretical introduction

A debate on greenwashing first appeared in the 1960s, when the interest in the questions of environmental protection grew. J. Westerveld, a biologist and activist for environmental protection, is considered the father of the term “greenwashing”. He first defined it in 1986. Since then, there have been plenty of interpretations of the term greenwashing, which is seen in the analysis of relevant literature dedicated to this concept. Examples of approaches to and interpretations of greenwashing are presented in Table 1. Greenwashing is also known as whitewash, green washing, eco-washing, green image washing green makeup or as green sheen

**Table 1.**  
*Selected definitions of greenwashing*

Author(s)	Definition of the concept
Delmas, Burbano	“The act of misleading consumers regarding the environmental practices of organisations (firm-level greenwashing) or the environmental benefits of a product or service (product-level greenwashing)”. “Poor environmental performance and positive communication about environmental performance”.
Lyon, Maxwell	“Greenwash can be characterized as the selective disclosure of positive information about a company’s environmental or social performance, while withholding negative information on these dimensions”.
Lyon, Montgomery	„The word greenwash is used to cover any communication that misleads people into adopting overly positive beliefs about an organization’s environmental performance, practices, or products”.
Marquis, Toffel	“Greenwashing is the practice of promoting environmentally friendly programs to deflect attention from an organisation’s environmentally unfriendly or less savory activities”.
Seele, Gatti	“a green message must combine falsity (information-related element) with an accusation of being misleading (external-distortion element)”.
Tateishi	“Communication that misleads people (e.g., consumers and stakeholders) regarding environmental performance/benefits by disclosing negative information and disseminating positive information about an organisation, service, or product”.
TerraChoice	“Greenwashing is the act of misleading consumers regarding the environmental practices of a company or the environmental benefits of a product or service”.
Walker, Wan	“Symbolic information emanating from within an organization without substantive actions”.

Zródło: (Delmas, Burbano, 2011, pp. 65-66; Lyon, Maxwell, 2011, pp. 5, 11; Lyon, Montgomery, 2015, p. 226; Marquis, Toffel, 2011, p. 19; Seele, Gatti, 2017, p. 241; Tateishi, 2018, pp. 372-373; TerraChoice Group Inc., 2009; Walker, Wan, 2012, p. 231).

The literature lacks a uniform definition of greenwashing (Lyon, Montgomery, 2015). After an analysis of numerous descriptions of this term it may be concluded that we are dealing with greenwashing where there is a discrepancy (sometimes great) between reality and the perception created in stakeholders’ minds (Walker, Wan, 2012; Ramus, Montiel, 2005) when it comes to eco-friendly actions taken up by companies, manufacturing of eco-friendly products or provision of eco-friendly services. The analysis of the literature shows that greenwashing demonstrates dependence on especially two features of an organization, that is poor environmental performance and positive environmental performance communication. It may be assumed that greenwashing occurs at the interface of these two features (Nguyen et al., 2019).

The different approaches to greenwashing give rise to a few possibilities of its classification. We may take TerraChoice’s 2009 definition as an example, which covers only one category of stakeholders (consumers) interested in greenwashing and its two levels (the level of the company and the level of the product (cf.: Kahle, Gurel-Atay, 2015). This is the definition that should be taken as a basis from the point of view of the discussion carried out in this article.

Delmas and Burbano (2011), on the other hand, classified greenwashing drivers grouping them into four main categories, that is non-market external drivers, market external drivers, organizational-level drivers and individual-level psychological drivers. When selecting such drivers in the discussion presented in this article, special focus should be given to consumer

demand (market external drivers category), which has an impact on organizational-level drivers.

An increased interest in the subject matter of greenwashing is determined by the growing importance of this phenomenon in the economic practice and by the fact that this subject matter brings research challenges and opportunities at the interface of various scientific disciplines (Table 2). Scholarly investigations of greenwashing commenced in mid-1990s. Its pioneers, Greer and Bruno (1996), discussed it in their book about environmental marketing. These investigations continue till this day.

**Table 2.**

*Examples of research perspectives and research interest areas relating to “greenwashing”*

<b>Research interest areas relating to greenwashing</b>	<b>Research authors</b>
financial perspective	Du, 2015; Lyon, Maxwell, 2011; Walker, Wan, 2012
marketing perspective	TerraChoice, 2009; Delmas, Burbano, 2011; Nguyen et al. 2019
corporate communication perspective	Walker, Wan, 2012; Yu et al., 2020
corporate leadership perspective	Blome et al., 2017
natural environment perspective in a corporate context	Geerts, 2014, Berrone et al., 2017
natural environment perspective in the context of public, legal and regulation-related actions	Berrone et al., 2015; Sun, Zhang, 2019; Przybojewska, 2022
perspective of sharing information about companies’ environmental actions against the perception of “greenwashing” by stakeholders in companies	Cho et al., 2009; Vries et al., 2015

Source: author’s own compilation.

Summing up the review of greenwashing-oriented literature, it needs to be noticed that adoption of one definition of this concept would probably have a limited usability due to its complexity and interdisciplinary nature, whereby many researchers investigate greenwashing by addressing it from different angles.

### **3. Consumer from the perspective of green market choices – consumers’ green behaviours**

According to the stakeholder theory (Freeman, 1984), various groups of stakeholders have an impact on the functioning of an organization. External stakeholders are one of such groups and include consumers next to, for example, suppliers, regulatory authorities and community.

Since the mid-1960s we have been observing a constant growth in the importance of the question of environmental protection (eco-development, then sustainable development (also in the context of companies)) in social and economic life. This has an impact on the development of relevant knowledge and this in turn translates into, for example, increased environmental awareness of many stakeholder groups, including consumers. Modelling consumers’ environmental awareness depends on their knowledge and the resulting sense of personal threat,

the sense of one’s own responsibility for the condition of the environment, the sense of health security and readiness for personal self-limitations (Łuczka-Bakuła, 1996). Importantly, the growing environmental awareness - a currently observable trend - leads to the development of eco-friendly behaviours (for example, research entitled “Investigating ecological awareness and behaviours of residents of Poland” [original title: *Badanie świadomości i zachowań ekologicznych mieszkańców Polski*] demonstrates that Poles hold the questions of caring about the natural environment most at heart; the following issues have been identified: environmental protection - 52%, health protection - 48% and economy - economic development - 20% (MKiŚ, 2020)). Increased knowledge about changes that occur in the natural environment and their consequences (including climate change) for life on earth has a direct impact on the sense of personal threat and thus the development of consumers’ emotional attitudes towards protection of the environment (climate change/environmental protection are a top concern of young people, both in Poland and internationally (Deloitte, 2020)). Therefore, we may assume that there is a certain regularity. The more the society is concerned about the consequences of detrimental changes in the natural environment, about its pollution and about excessive exploitation of its resources (renewable and non-renewable), the greater the likelihood that when they take market decisions they will be guided by environmental criteria, thus we will observe intensified “green consumer behaviour” (Baum, 2012; Paul et al., 2016; Wu et al., 2018). It is especially noticeable among communities that reside in areas with a high degree of environmental pollution. Special ecological values become more important there because the threat affects the consumer directly, including what is very valuable to him, that is his health (Mazur-Wierzbicka, 2020). This translates into increased importance of health-related motives when buying products and services.

Research shows (Stern, 2000; Nguyen et al., 2019) that there is a positive feedback between consumers’ ecological knowledge and awareness and their attitudes to consumption of ecological products and environmentally friendly products (in the production process and their use alike), that is “green consumption” (Witek, 2017). Such findings also demonstrate that an increase in consumers’ ecological awareness encourages them to choose eco products (Witek, Kuźniar, 2020; Sheehan, Atkinson, 2012). In addition, consumers who recognize the importance of the quality of ecological products, environmentally friendly products and their manufacturing process (often more expensive than that of “traditional” products) are willing to pay a higher price for them (Li et al., 2016). Results of research conducted in 2014-2015 on more than 30,000 consumers from more than 60 countries have shown that as early as seven years ago 66% of respondents declared that they agree to paying a higher unitary price for a given product on the condition that the company that manufactures it is guided by the principles of sustainable development. Moreover, in the under-34 age group (generations Y and Z), who as the years go by will shape the market in terms of demand, three out of four people declared they would pay a higher price (Nielsen, 2015). More than 50% of respondents admitted to looking at product packaging for information about producers’ activities related to

corporate social responsibility (CSR). It mainly concerned the product's impact on the natural environment and whether it was natural, that is whether it contained chemicals (Nielsen, 2015). This situation is slightly different in the perspective of a Polish consumer. According to research conducted in 2019 only 12% of Poles agreed to bear the costs of their pro-eco choices. On the other hand, while 16% of respondents tried to be eco, i.e. they recycled, saved electricity or water, they still would rather shift the cost onto the government or industry representatives. As shown in the research findings, the younger the generation, the more important being eco is (Deloitte, 2020). At the same time, studies show that in 2021 the share of eco-centric consumers in the general population in Poland, that is consumers who focus less on the brand or quality but who in turn look for products and services designed with the natural environment in mind, was 12% (Kantar, 2021).

#### **4. The force of customers' impact on companies' pro-eco decisions**

In the times when the importance of the question of environmental protection grows and when there is a strive for sustainable development, increasingly conscious external stakeholders begin to exert pressure on companies so that the latter aim to minimise their negative impact on the natural environment and rationally use resources to operate sustainably (Mazur-Wierzbicka, 2016). Consumers play the prime role among external stakeholders; they begin to report greater demand for products' ecological attributes (Mazur-Wierzbicka, 2015; Groening et al., 2018). As a consequence, companies take actions that evidence their involvement in environmental protection, which allows them to position themselves as environmentally-friendly entities (Schons, Steinmeier, 2016). Companies do so by, for example, implementing the strategy of ecological production and distribution (Huang et al., 2016; Groening et al., 2018) and also by communicating it when using green marketing. There is empirical evidence that consumers accept companies' building an image of a green brand so that they may strengthen their position on the market and gain competitive advantage (Wu, Lin, 2016). Such an attitude will encourage companies to take environmental actions consciously and responsibly, to demonstrate authentic care for environmental protection and to develop sustainably.

Failure to take into account consumers' pro-eco preferences and their orientation on the choice of environmentally friendly products may result in a loss of the market share and decreased profits (Gualandris, Kalchschmidt, 2014) - despite, of course, waiving the opportunity to build a reliable image of a company that cares about the condition of the environment.

Some companies may have difficulties complying with ecological standards. However, if they are under consumers' pressure and see benefits that pro-green engagement may bring, they may communicate false or partially false information about activities that serve

environmental protection. The research shows that enterprises that have built a good image of “eco-friendly companies” are perceived favourably (at least at the beginning) by consumers, even if in fact their efficiency and green activity are insufficient (compared to the information given to consumers) (Marin et al., 2009). Some companies try to use it and begin to apply greenwashing practices (Coskun et al., 2016) that may take different forms, e.g. hidden alternative costs (hiding information about product’s negative features), lack of evidence on whether a given product has eco-friendly attributes, vague terms, insignificant terms, intentional communication of untrue information about the offer’s green attributes, application of “false eco-labels”, or communicating using the “lesser evil” rule or white lies (TerraChoice, 2010).

## 5. Consequences of greenwashing

By carrying out a critical analysis of relevant literature and also taking into consideration research results (also those quoted above), we may specify greenwashing’s consequences both for consumers and companies that apply them.

Companies often use such forms of greenwashing which aim to provide consumers with large amounts of information, which is often incomprehensible or uses commonplace slogans. This greatly prevents them from assessing products reliably (Gosselt et al., 2017). Companies’ motives for taking eco-friendly actions may be unclear and they may perceive them in a negative light. Such behaviours from companies lead to increased scepticism among consumers towards environmentally-oriented companies (Nguyen et al., 2019).

Given the above, it is essential to point to the question of consumers’ green trust (that is the degree of belief in the company’s environmental performance - Chen, 2010). Unfortunately, it may not be objectively measured because consumers often have problems with comparing ecological products and services with their regular counterparts (condition: they must have the same functions and satisfy the same needs), and also with an assessment of how eco-products and eco-services solve specific environmental problems (Woo, 2021). When observing the growth of the number of greenwashing cases, we may assume that this trend will have a major impact on consumers’ trust in ecological products and services and in the companies that produce or provide them. When consumers feel cheated by the greenwashing exercised by a company, they may doubt their initiatives for sustainable development and may not want to maintain long-term relations with them.

Therefore, when companies communicate untrue information about their engagement in environmental protection and about their green actions, consumers may feel disoriented (Hamann, Kapelus, 2004; Parguel et al., 2011; Dahl, 2018), and in consequence such organizations may lose prestige and consumers’ trust (Polonsky et al., 2010; Hsu, 2011).

In turn, this will contribute to decreasing the company's profits and may result in it losing its position on the market, let alone bad reputation of an "unreliable business". It needs to be borne in mind that rebuilding consumers' trust is both time-consuming and requires considerable financial outlays.

We must also bear in mind that the growth of consumers' ecological awareness as well as the emergence of more and more information about reliable and unreliable eco-friendly actions (including greenwashing practices) that companies take mean that consumers begin to verify the level of their green trust in the companies using measures and means available to them. This, in turn, affects their attitudes towards the brand and their intentions or purchase choices (Akturan, 2018; Nguyen et al., 2019). For example, the 2021 study "Climate Sentiment Index" includes information that more than every second Pole checks whether companies are as green as declared (Deloitte, 2021). Similar conclusions may be drawn from a report which was published in November 2021, just before the COP26 climate conference, by a leading Australian research institute - SEC Newgate Research. More than half of investigated residents of large developed countries declare readiness to boycott companies with poor performance in the ESG area, that is the area related to their environmental and social impact and corporate governance (SEC Newgate, 2021).

Greenwashing practices applied by some companies act to the detriment of the "green (eco) case" and call for questions about companies' fairness towards their consumers. This negative perception is a true challenge for companies which are authentically environmentally engaged and take efforts to minimise their negative impact on the natural environment. It may lead to a situation where consumers demonstrate great scepticism and lack of trust in solutions intended to protect the environment in production, distribution or commercialisation processes (Braga et al., 2016). They will communicate it by a drop in their interest to buy green products offered by companies that genuinely care about the natural environment (Wang et al., 2019) and that sometimes allocate considerable financial resources to it.

## **6. Avoiding greenwashing**

This discussion brings yet another question: how can consumers cope with a threat like greenwashing? The answer to this question is not unequivocal.

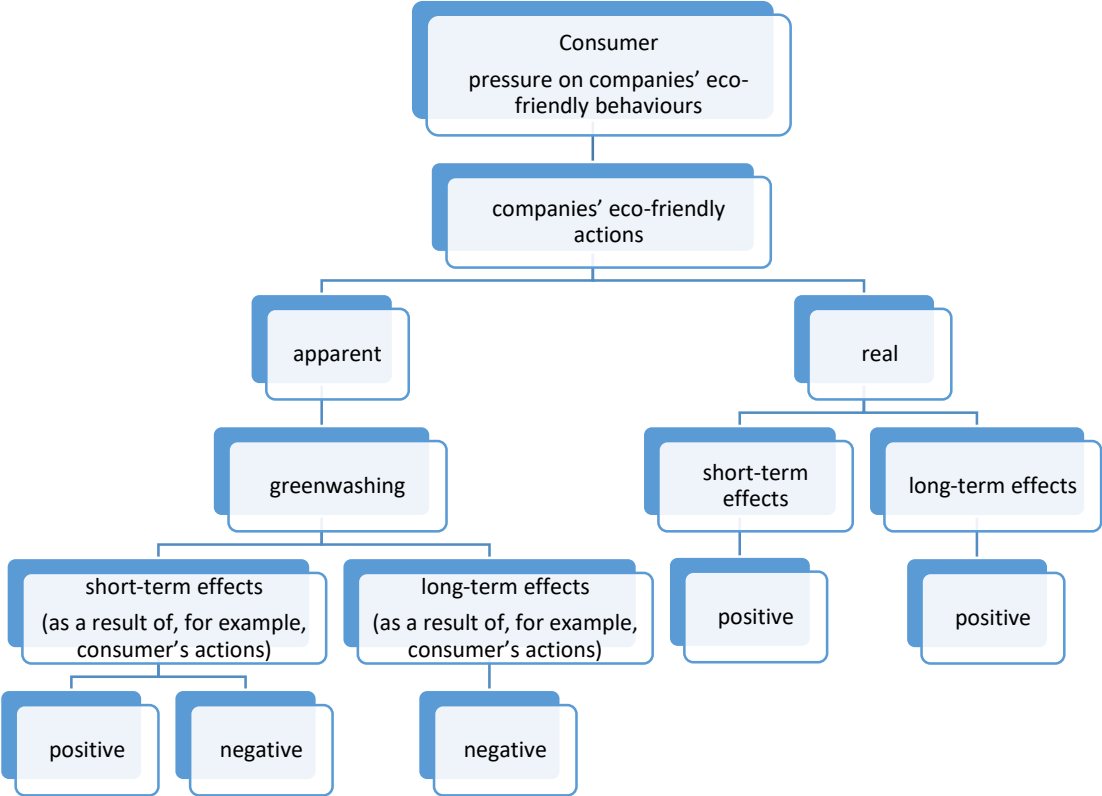
The starting point here is the consumers' desire to learn which producers of brands they are interested in truly care about the condition of the natural environment and which of them are only trying to boost their profits through a fictionally built eco-image. Consumers should certainly be sensitive to words used by companies which may be misleading. Such words may include: natural, ecological, clean, green, Earth-friendly, environmentally friendly, reduced emissions, or carbon neutral. They may also look for evidence on the companies' websites and



in their reports on corporate social responsibility and sustainable development to verify pro-environment statements used by a company for their own activity, products and services. They may also check the reliability and authenticity of eco-labels and certificates that a company uses (are these ecological labels?; are the certificates issued by relevant institutions recognized nationally and internationally in the industry?). More aware and more educated consumers may also carry out life cycle assessments (LCA). It is very helpful in identifying truly ecological products.

### 7. Summary

It seems reasonable to include in the summary a model that presents consumers’ significance and role in the greenwashing process. We open with the external stakeholder who by his actions contributes to unfair enterprises engaging in greenwashing practices towards their stakeholders, in particular (in the context of this discussion) a consumer and a silent stakeholder, that is the natural environment. We close with a consumer who acts as a recipient of the effects of greenwashing practices applied by companies (Figure 1).



**Figure 1.** Greenwashing - consumer’s role in the process.

Source: author’s own compilation.

Consumers stand at the front and at the end of the process of companies' pro-eco actions, both those that are fair (which is rewarded with loyalty and increased trust) and those that apply greenwashing practices (in this case it is important that consumers are able to verify a company's unfair behaviour quickly). They may then adjust their opinions of and attitudes towards the unfair undertaking and share this information with other market participants. Such an attitude will certainly boost the position of companies that are authentically engaged in environmental matters and expose entities that are environmentally unfair. However, in all of this it is important that a consumer has adequate knowledge and is ecologically aware. Knowledge and awareness are the basis to verify the authenticity of actions taken up by companies for the environment and to not let themselves be deceived. Since a society has found itself in a moment when consumption becomes a synonym of not only "buying", but also "responsibility", it is important that it be accompanied by the creation of uncomplicated, communicative and verifiable tools thanks to which consumers will find it easier to take decisions when choosing ecological products and thanks to which unfair enterprises will find it more difficult to practice greenwashing. Additionally, we need to bear in mind the actions taken by the legislator and companies for sustainable production and consumption. Their strong anchoring in economic practice and adequate regulations may be one of the more important factors that make greenwashing practices unprofitable.

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