

## **GREEN OR GREEDY? ETHICAL ISSUES OF GREEN MARKETING AND THE RISK OF GREENWASHING**

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The growing global demand for environmentally responsible products and services has turned green marketing into a powerful competitive tool. Companies increasingly integrate ESG (Environmental, Social, Governance) claims into their brand communication, promising carbon neutrality, sustainable sourcing, and circular production models. However, the rapid expansion of eco-friendly messaging has also fueled greenwashing. Greenwashing is the act of misleading consumers regarding the environmental practices of a company or the environmental benefits of a product or service [1]. The term greenwashing refers to a marketing practice that emphasizes the environmental friendliness of a product or brand. It is most often used by unscrupulous companies to create an eco-friendly image without making substantial sustainability efforts. The term was introduced in 1986 by environmentalist Jay Westerveld, who, in an essay, described a case where hotels encouraged guests to reuse towels rather than having them washed daily. The hotels justified this policy as a way to protect the environment, whereas Westerveld argued that the real motivation was to reduce operating costs [2].

Greenwashing today permeates nearly every aspect of daily life and consumer culture. It can be found in products as diverse as supposedly eco-friendly building materials, “natural” cosmetics, and “organic” foods, as well as in large-scale advertising campaigns that rely on the color green, images of leaves, and other nature-related symbols to evoke an impression of environmental responsibility. Beyond consumer goods, similar tactics are increasingly visible in the energy sector (e.g., “clean coal” or “carbon-neutral” claims), finance (so-called green bonds with limited transparency), fashion (fast-fashion “conscious” collections), and even digital services that highlight carbon offsets while running energy-intensive operations. Such practices exploit visual cues and emotional associations with nature to suggest sustainability without providing verifiable ecological benefits.

Over the past five to seven years, this phenomenon has become both a consumer trend and a deliberate marketing strategy. As scientific research began to highlight the health risks of low-quality products, such as those grown

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with pesticides or hormone additives, consumers started questioning whether the goods they consume and use daily are truly safe and environmentally friendly. In response, manufacturers began emphasizing “optimal growing conditions” and sustainable production practices, while a wave of local eco-brands emerged on the market. Today, shoppers increasingly scrutinize ingredient lists on product labels and are willing to pay a premium for items positioned as ecological or organic.

The more popular the “eco” trend becomes, the more actively other market players pick it up, and manufacturers strive to demonstrate their own involvement. Therefore, it is not surprising that, against the backdrop of discussions about climate change and overproduction, brands that offer environmentally friendly products and reusable alternatives are increasingly appearing. The question is not so much why such products are entering the market, but why the materials from which they are made have not yet become a general standard and why only individual series are still launched for them.

How to recognize that a brand is only imitating environmental friendliness? First of all, it is worth finding out how and under what conditions the product is created. Customers should pay attention to the ingredients, the real quality of the product, its durability, pricing policy and the company's overall business model. It is alarming if “eco” is limited only to green packaging design or loud slogans without confirmed facts or certificates.

Truly eco-conscious brands can be considered those that:

- work according to the principles of circular economy, where each stage of production involves the reuse or recycling of materials;
- ensure transparency of the supply chain – from raw material suppliers to the end consumer, including logistics and packaging;
- minimize harmful emissions and waste, use renewable resources and energy;
- have independent certifications (for example, EU Ecolabel, FSC, Fair Trade) and regularly report on environmental indicators;
- take responsibility for the product life cycle (offer recycling, repair or return programs, rather than shifting these responsibilities to the buyer) [3].

Only the comprehensiveness of such approaches, confirmed by documentation and practice, indicates that the “green” brand image is not a marketing screen, but a real strategy for sustainable development.

Greenwashing is manifested in various industries and scales both in the world and in Ukraine. A well-known example is the Volkswagen “Dieselgate” scandal, when the company promoted diesel cars as “clean”, but installed special devices to pass environmental tests [4]. As a result of which the level of nitrogen oxide emissions exceeded the norm by dozens of times. Similar practices are demonstrated by H&M with its “Conscious Collection” [5]. The

brand advertises individual lines as sustainable clothing, but does not ensure transparency of the production process and continues mass production in the fast fashion format. Nestlé, under the “Pure Life” brand, offers bottled water as an environmentally responsible product, although it uses disposable plastic and carries out intensive groundwater extraction [6]. The Ukrainian context is also rich in examples: the Earthsight investigation showed that IKEA used wood from illegal logging in the Carpathians, despite the presence of FSC certification [7]. The Bon Aqua brand emphasizes reducing the plastic content in its bottles by 20%, positioning it as a significant environmental step, although Ukraine still lacks an effective recycling system for such containers. Food brands like Mivina emphasize the “naturalness” of their products, but keep quiet about the presence of flavor enhancers and other additives, which are indicated in small print on the label. In addition, many local cosmetics and food manufacturers use “eco”, “bio” or “organic” labels on their packaging without independent certificates or confirmation of the sustainable origin of raw materials [8]. All these examples demonstrate how companies, speculating on the topic of environmental protection, create the illusion of responsibility through vague wording, selective disclosure of information or visual symbols of nature, while avoiding real systemic changes in their activities.

Greenwashing has become a noticeable phenomenon in the global marketing space and is actively penetrating the Ukrainian market. The growing demand for “green” goods and services encourages companies to position themselves as environmentally responsible, but in many cases this remains only a communication strategy without real changes in production or business model. The examples of Volkswagen, H&M, Nestlé, IKEA, Bon Aqua and a number of Ukrainian brands demonstrate that manipulative eco-statements can accompany even well-known international corporations. For consumers, greenwashing means the risk of being misled, paying a “green premium” for goods that do not have proven environmental benefits, and losing trust in truly sustainable brands. For businesses, it means reputational and financial losses in case of exposure, as well as the threat of lawsuits and fines. Therefore, effectively combating greenwashing requires a comprehensive approach: strengthening legal requirements and controls, introducing independent certification, developing recycling systems, and informing consumers. Only a combination of these elements can ensure that green marketing reflects real sustainable practices and does not serve as a short-term tool for manipulation.

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