



GREENWASHING: *Green Lies in the Food Industry*



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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

In the food industry, the strategy of enhancing a brand's sustainability/ecological image through packaging and promotional material using artificial and false depictions of ecological and sustainable imagery has remained a growing hindrance to achieving genuine sustainability. To bring food sustainability into reality, **greenwashing** is one of the problems that must essentially and intentionally be addressed.

As a duty-bound organization committed to raising awareness about and challenging ESG and food sustainability problems, we share our skills and methodologies to do our parts in this transformative era toward a better world. In this inaugural publication in a series of more to come, we tackle one of the unspoken problems of our food systems: how greenwashing downgrades sustainability efforts in the food industry.





INTRODUCTION

The blossoming rate of greenwashing practices by certain food organisations has increased consumer skepticism, and this has exerted adverse impacts on brands that are truly implementing environmentally friendly practices. Greenwashing, or what is also referred to as 'environmental misinformation' has accelerated greatly in the past decade, especially within the food industry, with the industry at large indisputably being one of the earliest and most frequent adopters of the strategy (Northen, 2011). This in turn has allowed for skepticism around 'green' claims and promises made by food companies and distributors to significantly increase amongst consumers. In his book entitled 'Ethical Marketing and the New Consumer', Chris Arnold (2009, pp. 22) writes that there is massive financial gain to performative environmentalism and this viewpoint is only set to spread unless notable responsibility is recognized.

Additionally, Rstorick of Hubbub (2019) writes that greenwashing ignores the core problem at hand, as the approach from an industry perspective is superficially motivated and blatantly ignores deeper and challenging discussions to be had in regards to environmental and ethical issues within the food sector. In order to critically understand in length how this issue presents itself in the food industry, it is important to analyse the topic from both an industry and consumer perspective. This paper will discuss how the issue of greenwashing presents itself in the food industry by examining greenwashing from a historical context, and the ways in which the phenomenon presents itself by examining specific tactics, briefly comparing it with other industries.



GREEN MARKETING OR GREENWASHING?

Unlike greenwashing, green marketing is when companies sell environmentally and socially conscious products or services. Green marketing is generally practical, honest, and transparent. However, it is easy for green marketing to translate to greenwashing when an organization doesn't live up to the standards of sustainable business practices.

REVEALING THE TREND

Accordingly, greenwashing, as it is now recognized in the food industry dates back to the early 1990s when public interest in conscious sustainable living became the forefront of general discourse (Northen, 2011). During this period, the average consumer became more aware of the dire environmental impact of their food purchases, resulting in the rise of not only the eco-conscious consumer but also the rise of the exploited green purchase (Northen, 2011). Accordingly, Sharon Beder (2011) professed and introduced a theory on greenwashing which states that the phenomenon is mainly compromised of three main elements in an established order. Those of which include 'confusion', 'front' and 'posture' (Beder, 2011). Confusion refers to the stage in which, due to the lack of information, feelings of perplexity and uncertainty are provoked amongst consumers (Schafeld, 2020). This is done by hindering and altering the 'truth'. The second stage; fronting is achieved by marketers and companies by 'underplaying' the importance and significance of the issue being seemingly tackled (Schafeld, 2020). Finally, the last stage: posture is taking the stage and succeeding in deceiving both consumers and regulatory bodies for capital gain (Schafeld, 2020). This elaborate method used to permit the use of greenwashing is particularly evident in the food industry.



THE FOOD INDUSTRY AND GREENWASHING

Eco-labelling Schemes

The excessive misuse of eco-labelling is one tactic that is employed by food companies that insinuates greenwashing. Eco-labels are labels present on food products that allow consumers to recognize the seemingly claimed ecological significance of the product (Basu et al., 2003). A variety of studies on the topic of eco-labelling have indicated that the average consumer has fairly limited knowledge of eco-labelling schemes and the particular meanings behind most eco-labels that they may come across in their daily lives (Nyugen and Du, 2010).



As of just 2014, the average consumer was faced with an approximate of 455 eco-labels across almost 25 industries. From clothing to food to hygiene products, and many more.

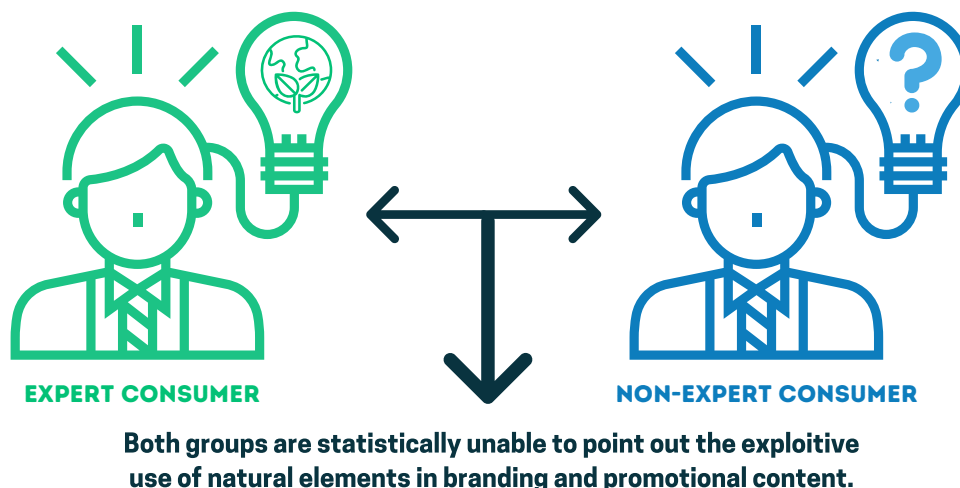
Therefore when consumers first come across disingenuous eco-labels on food products, they are in the, previously mentioned, confusion state of Beder's three stages of greenwashing (Beder, 2011). Eco-labels have been described as an easy and cheap alternative to more complex greenwashing tactics implemented by the industry due to the limited regulations and guidance on eco-labelling practices by third-party regulators. Moreover, the low costs associated with producing and adding an eco-label on a product or promotional material have made it one of the most appealing greenwashing tactics in the food industry (Covington, 2011). Moreover, some examples of eco-labels that are essentially meaningless include: "Natural ingredients", "Nontoxic", "Earth smart", "Green" and "Nature's friend". When no governmental or notable regulating body is present to back up an eco-label on a product, it is usually a form of greenwashing.

THE FOOD INDUSTRY AND GREENWASHING

Branded Exploitative Greenness

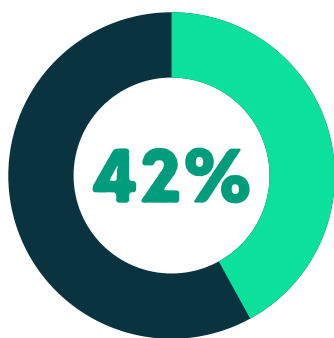
The use of nature or natural imagery in advertising is another highly effective yet subtle performative greenwashing tactic that is employed by the food industry to discreetly exploit consumer interest and the green purchase. This tactic has also been referred to as 'branded exploitative greenness' (Parguel et al., 2015). The way that this strategy is implemented is by enhancing a brand's ecological image through packaging and promotional material through the presence of artificial and false depictions of ecological and sustainable imagery by directly including images of natural elements. These elements can be present textually, visually and auditorily (Yan, 2015).

In a research study published in the International Journal of Advertising, this topic was explored in length, where 'expert consumers' were examined alongside 'non-expert consumers' on their knowledge and awareness of the use of natural elements in advertising (Parguel et al., 2015). 'Expert consumers' were defined as consumers with significant knowledge of the topic of sustainability and who considered themselves to be ecologically aware, and 'non-expert consumers' were defined as consumers with little to no knowledge on the topic (Parguel et al., 2015). Ultimately, this study concluded that there was no clear distinction between the sets of consumers on their ability to point out the exploitive use of natural elements in branding and promotional content due to how subtly and carefully maneuvered the tactic was employed.



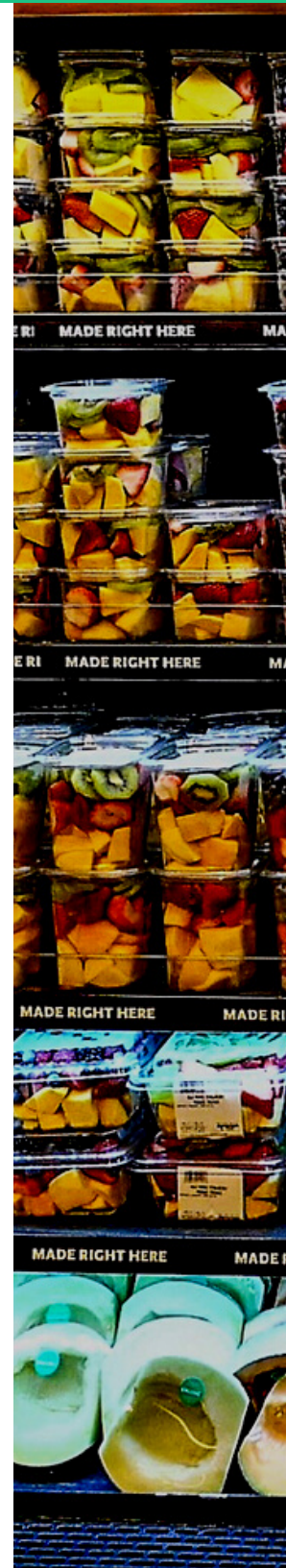
UNETHICAL GREENWASHING PRACTICES

With the combination of the two previously mentioned tactics of eco-labelling and artificial natural branding, the food industry is able to then further succeed in unethical greenwashing practices by positioning, directing and aiming these schemes at their most profitable demographics, which in turn, is their most successful greenwashing strategy. The demographic that the food sector marks as its prime target is society's most vulnerable and at-risk populations, including both mentally and physically (Askew, 2020). In particular, this demographic of targetted consumers includes parents and young children. This tactic within the larger realm of greenwashing is particularly harmful as it can result in ruinous and even fatal circumstances (Askew, 2020).



As of 2019, 42% of millennial parents explicitly stated their high level of interest in sustainable living and ethical food brand alternatives. These parents are often dubbed 'Green Parents'.

The combination of young children with busy parents makes it easy for food marketers to disguise processed and sugar-laden grocery staples as 'healthy alternatives' by merely including an eco-label or the addition of nature evoking imagery in their branding.



UNETHICAL GREENWASHING PRACTICES

Tips for Businesses:

1. Prove every claim:



Businesses can avoid greenwashing by ensuring that every 'green' claim made on their packaging, website, social media, etc. is backed up with easily-accessible evidence from their supply chain(s), that can further be backed up by government-regulated third-party verifications. Additionally, to meet this exact requirement, businesses can ensure that all claims made are backed-up with reliable and peer-reviewed scientific evidence that is easily available to the general public. By doing so, consumers are able to make up their own minds about said claims.

2. Be transparent: tell the whole story:



Don't cherry-pick 'positive claims' that are related to your product and business. It is vital to ensure that you are not narrowing down your products' story to only show the positive aspect of it. As a business, this is a very tempting route to take but can hinder your company's trustability, consumer loyalty and trust in a big way in the long run. In order to avoid this, tell the whole story of your product's life cycle to ensure transparency.

3. Avoid perfection:



When it comes to making environmental or 'green' claims as a business, the goal should always be honesty and integrity - never perfection for the sake of generating revenue. Brutal honesty can aid your business when it comes to building genuine consumer loyalty and having a greater impact as a 'green' business overall. Be clear about how your company is lacking when it comes to environmental issues, and how you aim to combat these issues. Admitting your flaws can seem like a bad business move, but honesty is the best policy when it comes to sustainable development. As a leading business, setting examples for industry professionals to come can bring about the true change that actually matters.



FINAL WORDS

Looking at the methods to combat the issue of greenwashing, we can alternatively compare and derive insights from the toy industry, where a similar demographic is targetted and comparable issues of greenwashing reside, however, the dilemma is tackled through the use of conscious corporate stance and the eviction of remaining morally neutral by taking a firm and genuine stance on ethical and ecological issues at hand.

ABOUT THE GREEN SPOON

The Green Spoon is a social enterprise committed to raising awareness about and challenging sustainability problems. Our team consists of passionate sustainability professionals with backgrounds in the sustainability industry and extensive knowledge and understanding of how the government, the industry, and the public can work together to advance ESG (Environmental, Social and Governmental) progress. Located in the UAE, The Green Spoon aligns itself with the UAE 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development, putting all its efforts to support the country in its sustainability journey.

Please visit <https://thegreenspoon.org/> for more details.

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