

GREENWASHING AND GREEN HUSHING. AN INTERNET OF THINGS APPROACH TO SUCH STRATEGIES

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Abstract

The global discourse on the concept of green rapidly increased during last years because of growing concerns about climate change and the environmental impact, with the trend of becoming green or being green turning into a must-have rather than wishful thinking. As the trend of green became popular worldwide, so did greenwashing, a practice of deceptive and exaggerated claims on companies' environmental level of responsibility linked to the economic, social, and environmental pillars or green hushing, where the companies chose not to make public their efforts towards sustainability. In the meantime, consumers are well aware of the environmental issues and try to play their part in combatting pollution, but do they have the right information or even support to become a part of the overall solution? The present paper highlights the real cost behind the greenwashing strategy by using a qualitative approach based on an analytical exploration about the way companies could become green without being accused of green washing or hushing, by using various methods including digital technologies. Real cases have been analysed and conclusions have been drawn providing insights of what the costs are to become green or apply greenwashing methods. The paper focuses also on the nowadays solutions to combat greenwashing, but what if there are others and maybe governments that could play a part in combating green washing and hushing?

Keywords: marketing, greenwashing, green hushing, IoT, strategy, sustainability

JEL code: M31, Q56, L10, Q01 M37

1. Introduction

A simple search on google.com on how to become green returns over 10 billion results in less than a second. Various ideas, practical or not, applicable to common people or companies, easy or costly, it seems that everybody has an idea on how to become green, sustainable and contribute to the fight against climate change and depletion of resources. It is an effort humankind needs to adopt by changing its behaviour and routine quite quickly. From turning off the lights when unnecessary, using less heat and water, recycle and/or reuse various products and materials, moving green through carpooling or using bikes, these are the easy small steps that everyone could take quite quickly without any additional costs, preparations or investments (*What Does Going Green Mean*, 2023).

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For companies, the process needs more planning that should be captured into their business plans. Employees should adopt the same behaviour as in their own homes and this would give an impetus to the management towards a more responsible way of running the company. In case of companies, there is also a misunderstanding of terms as *becoming green* is not the same as ***environmentally or eco-friendly***. Safdie (2022) in the Greenly institute blog explains the confusions with *being environmentally or eco-friendly and becoming green*. While environmentally friendly refers to the products or services of the company as not being harmful for the environment, becoming green refers to the company's efforts to help environment or to reduce whatever harmful impact they previously had on the planet (Safdie, 2022).

In this round the clock race of becoming green, eco-friendly, and sustainable, there are some who considered easier paths, and nowadays we could hear quite often the term of greenwashing. What is greenwashing? In 1986, Jay Westerveld, an American ecologist, made up the term of greenwashing linked to the practices of various hotels around the world that were asking their clients to reuse the towels in order to save water and energy. He considered that through this practice, hotels were not doing enough for the environment, but only hiding from other practices that could have had a real impact (Kerner, 2023). Kerner (2023) also pinned down a definition for greenwashing, a term to explain the actions and claims taken by organisations towards saving the environment, but that actually misled the public opinion.

As people and businesses strive to adopt a circular lifestyle and a culture based on protecting the environment, they faced numerous green initiatives and strategies (Yang et al., 2014). While many of these efforts are genuine and effective, some may be based on greenwashing, raising concerns about the credibility of green claims. To ensure transparency and accountability, many countries insist on stricter regulations being urgently needed. Basically, greenwashing not only misleads consumers, but also undermines the collective effort to combat climate change and protect the planet's resources. Collaboration between governments, industry bodies and advocacy groups are therefore crucial in establishing clear standards and guidelines, enabling consumers and businesses to discern genuine environmentally responsible practices.

Sustainable development demands achieving a harmonious balance between global consumption and production, driven by transparent, ethical, and efficient practices that address the three fundamental pillars: social, economic, and environmental. In this context, greenwashing serves as a theoretical concept, acting as a precautionary measure to safeguard these sustainable practices and bring to light the genuine intentions of companies and organizations. The integration of Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR) or green marketing into various marketing strategies adds complexity (Sen et al.,

2001), as these concepts can easily be mistaken for or associated with greenwashing. By diligently adhering to legislative norms, monitoring key indicators, and examining comprehensive reports, the potential implications of greenwashing could be identified, helping during the quest of establishing a credible and authentic green brand. Building trust among stakeholders and consumers is essential, ensuring that the commitment to sustainability is both robust and verifiable, promoting a meaningful and lasting impact on the journey towards a greener and more sustainable future.

Thus, since Earth Day's inception in the 1970s, corporate environmental performance has increased, but so has greenwashing (Torelli et al., 2020). As we said, this term refers to misleading communications that aim to create a positive image of a company's environmental practices. Due to the abundance of claims regarding social, economic, and environmental responsibility, it has become a challenge to distinguish genuine campaigns from apparent ones. In this sense, ecological washing and environmental communication play a crucial role in shaping the perception and implementation of sustainability practices. Today, sustainability has become a growing concern for consumers, businesses, and society as a whole, motivating companies to showcase their environmental efforts and commitment to green practices. However, this increased focus on sustainability has also amplified the deceptive practice of eco-washing (Yates and Evans, 2014).

2. Green vs greenwashing

According to specialists in the field, there are some steps that companies should follow in order to become sustainably green. First thing first, the company should go through a *carbon assessment* process of its actual carbon emissions, preferably produced by a specialized company, providing them with a necessary starting point for future actions in the company's endeavours to become green (Safdie, 2022). Safdie (2022) proposes to continue the plan with 3 more steps:

- defining the goals of the company and create a personalized plan to do so, something that should not be beneficial only for the environment, but also for the business itself (impact investing, carbon credits, net-zero emissions, reforestation);
- teaching employees the value of going green, as they are the pillars of the companies, the most important piece of the overall green gearing, not only for reaching goals, but also for upkeeping them;
- let people know about the company's evolution towards green in order to influence other towards such an attitude and behaviour and build awareness through various events and social media.

According to various sources, there are many companies considered a model of becoming green, using various strategies to achieve their pre-defined goals.

Nike, the multinational corporation, involved in sports equipment, built its strategy, and implemented it at all levels of activity (Gemeš, 2023). It created a special line of products that uses environmentally friendly resources, like recycled polyester. As energy sources, renewable is the main one including in manufacturing. the company also put together a Net to zero strategy that includes elimination of single-use plastics in their facilities and started a dialogue inside the worldwide design community for adoption of a circular design concept (Gemeš, 2023).

As coffee and tea are in top 3 the most consumed beverages in the world, water being on first place (Maxine, 2022), plastic cups have been the first targeted products to be considered as not eco-friendly (Carney et al., 2023). Starbucks, a worldwide known chain of coffee shops, put some efforts in its plans to become green. The company worked on its cups to make them not only recyclable, but also reusable. In the same time, the company focused on ethically sourced coffee, turning coffee into the first worldwide sustainable agri-product and helping farmers hit by plant diseases and climate change by providing 100 million strong coffee trees (Gemeš, 2023).

Ikea, a multinational company which main activity is production and sales of furniture planned its trip to green throughout its entire operations. For the supply chain, over 50% of wood comes from sustainable foresters and all cotton from productions awarded the Better Cotton standard (less water, chemicals, and energy). Even if their goal was set to be fully renewable powered by 2020, in 2016 they became a net exporter of energy (*10 Global Companies That Are Environmentally Friendly* | Virgin, 2016).

Car manufactures are one of the biggest polluters, but some of them have already implemented strategies to combat this. It is the case for one of the big players in the industry, Ford Motor Company, which through their ten-part environmental policy made two of their models 80% recyclable. Fuel efficiency has been also one of their focuses, but they invested on the production facilities and their techniques of building the cars. Paint fumes are captured now and turned into fuel, while the factories are equipped with cooling systems that use geothermal power (Lawson, 2016).

The success stories stay with those companies which realised that actually greenwashing was not a long-term solution and turned themselves into green models. Indeed, budgets and power of influence have been the main ingredients, but even these should have been the ones that could have prevented those companies not to become truly green. Such an example is a tech giant, Apple. By publishing a Paper and Packaging strategy they communicated to the world how they would transform their packaging solutions into sustainable

ones. But Apple's issues were not in packaging, but in their products, which were not repairable and/or upgradable, with the consumers being forced to get rid of their products and buy new, better and functionable ones (Veksler, 2017). The greenwashing was quite easily and rapidly detected, the company being constrained to take the appropriate measures for such a huge enterprise. Apple did not give up their strategy for the consumer not being able to intervene into the product, but they designed longer lasting products and put together a worldwide programme of buy-back or refurbishment of products, further investing also into renewable resources and more-efficient production facilities (Gemeš, 2023).

2.1. Greenwashing

In January 2021, European Commission along with member states' national consumer authorities published the results of a vast sweep of companies' websites, a yearly exercise that tries to determine breaches that could harm the consumer's rights (European Commission, 2021). In 2021, for the first time, the exercise was focused on greenwashing, especially on FMCG (fast moving consumer goods) and on those companies claiming a green approach and selling green products. The results have been surprising but enforcing European Commission's suspicions. Even more, this sweep has been performed in coordination with the International Consumer Protection and Enforcement Network (ICPEN) covering the entire globe, their results proving same trends as the EU ones (European Commission, 2021). Overall, in 42% of the cases, authorities have reason to believe that claims are false, inflated, and unreliable. 344 claims have attentively been studied and in more than half of them, the platform did not offer sufficient information for consumer to be able to decide on claim's precision. In 37% of cases only vague statements were used like *conscious*, *eco-friendly*, and *sustainable*, without further substantiated information, all these misleading the consumer. In almost 60% of cases, the trader had no easily accessible info to back-up its claims (European Commission, 2021).

A Harvard Business Review study from June 2022 on business consequences of greenwashing had interesting results also on consumer behaviour (Ioannou et al., 2022). The study focused on 202 American companies, publicly traded, their green goals and actions taken between 2008 and 2016, also using data from the American Customer Satisfaction Index (ACSI), Worldscoop for financial data and Thomson Reuters' ASSET4 ESG for social responsibility. Findings have been that consumers were well aware of the gap between reported objectives and the actual performance, which have influenced their perception towards those companies and their products. But at the same time, even if the consumers were prompt in penalizing the "greenwashers", absolved those that were highly regarded by them. Those

companies which were known for their qualitative products or highly innovative, but failing their green goals, did not experience any decrease in the customer satisfaction (Ioannou et al., 2022).

A study by Pellegrino (2023) points out a number of cases of greenwashing that were disclosed by the press, affecting millions of customers, but also businesses which got high fines. Volkswagen, an automotive company, which worked on the emissions test of their diesel engine through a software detecting when a pollution test was conducted and being able to lower the emission levels. Coca-Cola, a beverage company, which publicly announced that would not drop plastic bottles, because of its consumers who considered them popular. The same company promoted a sort of beverage that should have been green by using a natural sweetener Stevia. Experts proved that the product still contained large quantities of sugar, misleading its customers through the low sugar label. Fast fashion is another sector under the magnifier of specialists. Even if H&M, Zara or Uniqlo claim that they recycle, re-use and use renewable energy in their facilities, all these actions compared with insufficient data and information provided on the green claims, over-production and over-buying, it is not enough to consider the fast-fashion companies to be green (Pellegrino, 2023).

Even if greenwashing was wrongly considered as beneficial for various companies, the impact of such practices like lower market shares, lower consumer confidence and the huge fines, developed a new trend: *green hushing*. In this case companies chose not to divulge their environmental plans and achievements (Byrne, 2022). Coined in 2008 by Jerry Stiffelman, a brand strategist, and Sami Glover, writer, the practice became a subject of study in late 2022 through a report performed by South Pole, a transnational consultancy (Dhanani, 2023). The reports looked into large organisations with CSR and sustainability leads and found out that 67% of them have targets on net-zero and emission reduction based on science, but 23% decided not to make public their milestones (South Pole, 2022). What would be the reasons for a company to adopt a green hushing strategy? One of them would be the fear of not being criticised because they did not do enough or did not any of what they have promised, avoiding any accusations of greenwashing. Another one would be not to make their customers feel guilty, that they, as citizens, have not done enough. Others considered as a reason that usually sustainable and natural products are considered low quality. Costs could be another reason, especially for smaller companies that believe sustainable certification is quite expensive. Timing of communication is also an issue. What to communicate and in which stage of implementation are challenging questions which not all companies are capable to answer (Dhanani, 2023; South Pole, 2022).

2.2. Legislative regulations on greenwashing

Greenwashing, therefore, is a marketing practice through which a company or organization promotes its products, services, or image as *ecological, green, or environmentally friendly*, despite the fact that they may have a negative impact on the environment or may be insufficiently sustainable (Furlow, 2010). To combat greenwashing and to protect both consumers and the environment, various countries and organizations have implemented a series of legislative regulations or guidelines to keep greenwashing under control and to regulate this practice.

Here are some examples of legislative regulations on greenwashing at international and European level:

- European Commission: Within the EU, Ecolabelling Guidelines (*EUEcolabel_LogoGuidelines_2022.Pdf*, 2023) have been developed, which set clear criteria for various products and services, so that it is easier for consumers to identify truly environmentally friendly products and services. This year, the European Commission has proposed a directive to regulate 'Green Claims,' setting detailed rules for environmental claims and labels used by traders selling products to EU consumers. This new directive complements 2022 proposals to amend EU consumer protection laws, addressing unfair practices that could mislead consumers from sustainable choices and may enable enforcement action and collective redress under the EU's 'New Deal for Consumers' (Forwood et al., 2023);
- United Nations Environment Program (UNEP): UNEP has developed the " Sustainable Fashion Communication Playbook " to help companies avoid greenwashing and adopt more sustainable approaches in promoting their products and services (Abdulla, 2023);
- The Global Reporting Initiative (GRI): these standards are a comprehensive set of guidelines for sustainability reporting. They provide a globally recognized framework for organizations to report their economic, environmental, and social impacts transparently and consistently. The GRI standards are designed to help companies and organizations measure, understand, and communicate their sustainability performance to stakeholders;
- Federal Trade Commission (FTC) - USA: The FTC provides guidelines on eco-friendly advertising that require companies to be accurate and have sufficient evidence to support their environmental claims (*Green Guides*, 2018). Additionally, clarity is necessary, and ambiguities should be avoided to prevent misleading consumers (Chen and Chang, 2013);
- ISO Standards - International Organization for Standardization (ISO): ISO 14021 specifies principles and requirements for self-declared

environmental labelling of products, enabling companies to make transparent and credible environmental claims.

Greenwashing regulations have become increasingly important and necessary in the context of the growing concerns of companies and organizations for the environment and sustainability (Sun and Zhang, 2019). In fact, these regulations were introduced to protect consumers and the environment by ensuring that the claims, manner and message of promotion and eco-labels are accurate, verifiable, and transparent. Many countries, regions, and organisations, such as the US Federal Trade Commission (FTC) and the European Commission, have developed guidelines and standards that encourage companies to promote their products and services in an environmentally responsible manner. However, it is essential that these regulations remain up-to-date and relevant to address ongoing greenwashing challenges and support sustainable development in our society. By complying with and enforcing these regulations, it would help to create a more transparent and informed setting, thus encouraging companies to adopt more environmentally responsible practices and providing to consumers the right information to make sustainable and responsible, informed choices.

2.3. How to avoid greenwashing

Academia, businesses, and consultancies try to find the best solutions for companies to avoid greenwashing. And everyone agreed that data and information to back-up green claims should be at the forefront of any strategy, goal, and achievement. A clear and through communication should be also supported by data collected through various techniques, especially Internet of Things (LaFleur, 2023). When parts of the green strategy is based on company's consumptions, various analysis on data collected about energy and water usage, waste and emissions are invaluable not only for communications, but also for further improvements in different areas of activity (Akila, 2023). Either it is about fleet management, IoT assisting the companies to save petrol, or waste management, where IoT has already been proven to help immensely, or even choosing an e-reader over a printed book in their operations, this kind of solutions would bring the company a step closer to sustainability, offering in the same the needed data to firmly support their green claims (Brenneis et al., 2022).

According to the UN environment programme, only 9% of the 300 million tons of plastics used and produced yearly are recycled (United Nations Environment Assembly, 2022). With all the efforts put in, it seems that a linear approach of business models it is not enough and even more it is quite a barrier towards change (Mazur, 2023). Mazur (2023) in his article offers a solution towards the adoption of a circular business model through IoT, considering that only such a model would bring plastic into a full circle. From his point of view,

consumer is the starting point in order to create this circular model helped by an IoT ecosystem. The use of certain apps to scan barcodes that could provide information linked to recyclability of a product, chemical content, or carbon emission, are one of the solutions for consumers to be informed and acknowledge their impact. The same apps could be a helping hand also for recycling, guiding the consumer and awarding them points that could be exchanged into vouchers or money (Mazur, 2023). In all these, IoT is the one managing the interrelatedness between all the entities, part of the circular model, using sensors to sort the waste and offer better solution for the future.

Illegal waste dumping is another cause of concern, but with the help of digital technologies, placing camera and sensors around those existent or possible sites, it would help authorities to catch the offenders and prevent further such activities (Mazur, 2023).

Using IoT and its sensors, data collected, and analysis could help companies to turn their facilities into smart buildings and optimize their costs, creating at the same time a user-friendly and orientated space for work. Companies working in agriculture and livestock could use IoT to moderate their emissions and evaluate weather influencing crop production (Fulton, 2021).

Another solution to avoid greenwashing consists in the implementation of the environmental communication (Nemes et al., 2022). These two concepts are closely related in the context of sustainability and corporate responsibility. As the explanations already mentioned, greenwashing refers to the deceptive practice of promoting a company, product, or service as green and sustainable, when in fact it has no commitment to sustainability, misleading consumers through false advertising and claims, or exaggerations about an organization's environmental efforts. On the other hand, environmental communication is the transparent and effective dissemination of accurate information about an organization's sustainability initiatives and their impact on the environment (Hansen, 2011). This involves an open and honest dialogue with stakeholders, including customers, investors, employees, and communities, about the company's environmental practices, achievements, and challenges. A key aspect of environmental communication is building and fostering trust and credibility by providing evidence-based data and measurable results, enabling consumers and stakeholders to make informed decisions and support companies that are truly committed to sustainability. By combating greenwashing and promoting honest environmental communication, businesses can foster a culture of authenticity, accountability, and positive change, contributing to a more sustainable and responsible business landscape. In other words, environmental communication is the opposite of greenwashing and the solution to combating deceptive environmental practices.

3. Methodology

In this desk-based research work focused on qualitative topics, specifically addressing the challenges and solutions related to greenwashing and green hushing, a number of 39 articles, papers and internet sources were consulted to highlight the premises emphasized in the specialized literature in association with the characteristics of the greenwashing and green hushing concepts according to the implementation of a circular economy and lifestyle through IoT.

This paper could be viewed also as an example on how not to greenwash and green hush, by presenting some perspectives and solutions which could contribute to a greener image for a company or organization, centring on transparency, circular economy practices, integration of Internet of Things (IoT) technologies, legislative compliance, effective environmental communication, successful case studies, consumer awareness, corporate social responsibility, and a commitment to continuous improvement and adaptability.

Also, this research is based on the explanation of the concepts of green vs greenwashing and green hushing in both scientific and practical ways and presents some worldwide legislative regulations put in place to combat the unfair green practices (Mihajlović, 2020). Concepts as circular economy and IoT have been followed during the research by trying to find various solutions that could be applied by the companies while highlighting the green concept from a marketing and sustainable point of view.

The design of the qualitative desk research has been conducted through the method explained by Bassot (2022) by reviewing the specialized literature and interpreting it in an analytical manner, which highlights the premises and results of the research in a qualitative way.

4. Results

This paper puts together the latest information on greenwashing and green hushing, also analysing cases of companies that were alleged of such practices to give a better understanding of what the two terms means in practical terms.

Climate change and depletion of resources are certain, and it needs a common effort to combat them. The entire society should play its part and make all the efforts to achieve the sustainability goals. But all these efforts should be for real and not just a publicity stunt.

Consumers could be considered the main polluters (Cho, 2020), but only because they are offered the chance to buy products and to consume beyond their basic needs. That is why companies should be the main educator towards sustainability and it is important for them to behave in a proper way and stand as an example.

Greenwashing and green hushing exists and have been proven either by the civil society or, quite recently, by governments and international organisations, realising how much harm they could cause.

Only following a well-thought plan linked to the company's needs and garnished with measurable goals, backed-up by real communication supported by data, companies cannot be accused of greenwashing. There have been such cases of companies accused of greenwashing, but after revisiting their plans they became an example and well-regarded by the consumers.

Green hushing is even more complicated and here governments should play a bigger role through better and simpler regulations that would help smaller companies to be able to get into the green camp. Costs to put in place green solutions and those involved in the certification process are unbearable for most of the small companies. Every effort should be encouraged, but it should be part of a well-thought plan with concrete, measurable and transparent results, supported by data and valuable information.

5. Conclusions

To conclude the analysis of this paper in a scientific way, we can thus ask ourselves if it is better for companies to adopt a behaviour of green hushing to the greenwashing. Starting from the highlighted premises and theoretical concepts debated in the specialized literature, we can observe that the subject of this work considers the following question: is green hushing the new greenwashing?

Thus, in the first part of the work, the trends of the concept of greenwashing, derived from the notion of green, were noticed and associations were made from the point of view of sustainability. Both the implications of the circular economy, as well as IoT represent topics that contribute to the avoidance of greenwashing and more recently, green hushing. The difference between the two concepts consists in the fact that, while greenwashing represents a practice of misleading consumers about the sustainable image of an organisation or company, green hushing represents a practice through which the businesses choose to proceed in silence, out of fear not to be accused of greenwashing. Practically, there is a fine line between the two notions, which is mostly based on organizational ethical aspects. In order to prevent these challenges, international organisations have introduced various legislations, so that for false statements that do not prove the sustainable character or the green image of a company, penalties are paid. We can say that greenwashing is based on a different marketing strategy than the one promoting green actions.

The examples of industries that have already adapted to circular economy display solutions approached on how to avoid deceptive or silent promotion practices. Thus, industries such as tech, sports equipment, beverages, production and sale of furniture, and car manufactures were analysed from the

point of view of adopting green models in their specific activities. The behaviour of a company was also treated, which, although it had sustainable packaging, its products were not part of this category. Such examples of greenwashing can be noticed by consumers and harshly sanctioned, adversely affecting the image of a company. Adapting to the market in a circular economy, with solutions that protect the environment, respect customers, and involve IoT to maximize profit, represents a marketing strategy with future perspectives.

Therefore, avoiding both greenwashing and green hushing, is an objective that should be found in the promotion and sustainability strategy of any company that wants to become and be mentioned in a world marked by innovation, digitization and green. To support this approach, the authorities could offer the possibility of less expensive certifications, such as sustainability reports, standards and other relevant categories, and the legislation should focus more on favourable aspects derived from the reduction of resource consumption, recycling, and reuse, encouraging the organisational character based on global sustainability through environmental, economic, and social implications. By encouraging an environment of genuine commitment to sustainability, we can foster a more significant and lasting impact on the preservation of our planet for future generations.

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