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Greenwashing – The Dark Side of Eco-Friendly Marketing. A Case Study from Slovakia

Greenwashing – ciemna strona marketingu ekologicznego. Studium przypadku ze Słowacji

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Abstract: Greenwashing is the practice of making false or misleading claims about the environmental benefits of a product or service. The purpose of this study is to examine consumers' perceptions and experiences in relation to the greenwashing tactics used by Slovak businesses within the framework of environmental health policy. In the present study, we used data obtained through an inductive qualitative research design according to consolidated criteria. From 14 participants aged 20-45, using reflexive thematic analysis, we analysed three semi-structured focus group interviews. Four descriptive themes were created: 1. Individual and interpersonal determinants of consumers; 2. Marketing and organisational determinants of brands; 3. Public policy of the environment and health of the Slovak Republic; and 4. Environmental sustainability and ecological protection. The findings of our study confirmed that greenwashing often relies on buzzwords to reel in consumers, making them believe that the products they purchase are biodegradable or ethically sourced. The observed deterioration of consumer trust in product brands as a reaction to greenwashing threatens the potential of green marketing and contributes to damaging the reputation of the producers. One solution could be disseminating information on how customers can verify the authenticity of organic products through public and social media.

Keywords: greenwashing, eco-friendly marketing, customers, social-ecological model, Slovakia

Streszczenie: Greenwashing to praktyka polegająca na publikowaniu fałszywych lub wprowadzających w błąd twierdzeń na temat korzyści środowiskowych danego produktu lub usługi. Celem niniejszego badania jest analiza spostrzeżeń i doświadczeń konsumentów w odniesieniu do taktyk "greenwashingu" stosowanych przez słowackie przedsiębiorstwa w ramach polityki prośrodowiskowej. W niniejszym badaniu wykorzystaliśmy dane uzyskane w drodze indukcyjnego projektu badań jakościowych według skonsolidowanych kryteriów. Stosując refleksyjną analizę tematyczną, przeanalizowaliśmy trzy częściowo ustrukturyzowane wywiady grupowe przeprowadzone wśród 14 uczestników w wieku 20-45 lat. Wyodrębniono cztery wątki opisowe: 1. Indywidualne i interpersonalne determinanty konsumentów; 2. Marketingowe i organizacyjne uwarunkowania marek; 3. Polityka publiczna dotycząca środowiska i zdrowia Republiki Słowackiej; oraz 4. Zrównoważony rozwój środowiska i ochrona ekologiczna. Wyniki naszego badania potwierdziły, że greenwashing często opiera się na modnych hasłach, które mają przekonać konsumentów, że kupowane przez nich produkty ulegają biodegradacji lub pochodzą z etycznych źródeł. Obserwowany spadek zaufania konsumentów do marek produktów w reakcji na stosowanie praktyk greenwashingu stwarza zagrożenie dla potencjału zielonego marketingu i przyczynia się do zniszcze-

nia reputacji producentów. Jednym z rozwiązań mogłoby być rozpowszechnianie informacji o tym, w jaki sposób klienci mogą zweryfikować autentyczność produktów ekologicznych za pośrednictwem mediów publicznych i społecznościowych.

Słowa kluczowe: greenwashing, marketing ekologiczny, klienci, model społeczno-ekologiczny, Słowacja

Introduction

Eco-friendly marketing - also known as green marketing or green purchase behaviour - is a phenomenon in the modern market and has become a popular trend as companies attempt to appeal to environmentally conscious consumers. Eco-friendly marketing is a term used to describe any campaign that promotes products or services that have been designed to have a low environmental impact, use sustainable materials, and increase the environmentally conscious practices of customers (Kundu 2019, 215; Aggarwal and Jha 2022, 150; Ewe and Tjip-tono 2023, 240-242). This can be achieved in several ways, such as using renewable energy sources, incorporating environmentally friendly packaging, reducing waste, emphasising the use of recycled materials, and using environmentally friendly materials. Eco-friendly marketing is important because it raises awareness of the impact that our consumer choices have on the environment. Moreover, it helps to create a market for eco-friendly products and services, encouraging businesses to reduce their environmental footprint.

All definitions agree that greenwashing is a situation where a company falsely presents itself or its products in a better light in connection with sustainability and environmental performance in order to impress the customer (Ramus 2005, 379). Lyon and Montgomery (2015, 227) reported that the popular use of the term "greenwashing" encompasses a range of communications that mislead consumers into adopting overly positive beliefs about the environmental performance of businesses, their practices or their products. The authors further add that The Concise Oxford English Dictionary defines greenwashing as: "...misinformation

disseminated by organisations to present an environmentally responsible public image that is perceived as unfounded or deliberately misleading". All these concepts of greenwashing reflect an interest in communication that misleads people into overly positive beliefs about an organisation's environmental performance, practices, or products in several countries such as China, the USA and India (de Freitas, Netto et al. 2020, 3). Greenwashing was a common practice during the 1990s; however, these days there are various certifications and standards that companies have to meet which enable customers to detect it. In spite of these measures, the question remains as to whether consumers are actually able to recognise greenwashing.

Green marketing, which is part of a socially responsible corporate strategy, is often confused with greenwashing. The difference between greenwashing and green marketing can be difficult for customers to distinguish. According to Gingerich (2015, 47), greenwashing occurs when the reporting entity falsely promotes or embellishes the eco-friendly attributes of its products rather than implementing policies to reduce their environmental impact. Thus, greenwashing is the act of making misleading or false claims about the environmental benefits of a product or service. This can include exaggerating the environmental benefits of a product, omitting important information about its environmental impact, or using vague or meaningless terms to describe its eco-friendliness. There is growing concern that some companies engage in greenwashing; a study conducted by TerraChoice (Dahl 2010, 248), an environmental marketing agency, found that more than 95% of the 2,219 products they

surveyed made at least one false or misleading environmental claim. This study illustrates the extent to which greenwashing is prevalent in the marketplace.

The main problem of contemporary green marketing is the lack of consumer trust in the environmental information communication of enterprises, which is not surprising given the widespread trend of greenwashing (Lewandowska, Witczak and Kurczewski 2017, 30). Consumers are one of the most important stakeholders in the market. Every time a customer decides to make a purchase, they have the potential to contribute to a more sustainable consumption pattern; however, the challenge lies in the nature and knowledge of consumers. They are often not rational, and their decisions are, in fact, sometimes contradictory (Richardson 2020). Perceptions of sustainability issues are related to the degree to which consumers are concerned about environmental issues and are willing to take action to address them. Based on several studies summarised by Sharma (2021), it can be argued that consumer attitudes towards green products are positively correlated with the purchase of these products, such that an individual who has a positive relationship with the environment will be more likely to purchase green products. Sharma further adds that due to increasing environmental interest and knowledge green awareness has increased in Europe, as well as in other countries; nevertheless, there is still a gap between the attitude and actual purchasing behaviour. Green consumer awareness is not enough to increase the sales of green products. Specific values, beliefs and norms that drive a general predisposition to act with pro-environmental intent play a role in consumer attitudes. Consumer attitudes link personal stable values to actual attitudes and behaviours at the consumption level. Individuals with an egoistic value orientation will mainly consider the costs and benefits of a green product and its impact on them personally, whereas individuals with a social-altruistic value orientation will

base their green consumption decisions on the perceived costs and benefits to other people. (Jansson et al. 2010). Companies often face positive pressure to become environmentally efficient, which not only contributes to their profitability but also to their overall economic stability. Many businesses are adopting green marketing mainly for reasons of opportunity, social and environmental responsibility, government and competitive pressure, and cost reduction. Gaining a competitive advantage can be achieved through several green marketing strategies to understand deeper connections between customers and stakeholders, environmental and social values, brand building and proactive business.

Nguyen et al. (2019) point out that many food companies exploit greenwashing to profess to be environmentally friendly, which in turn makes the claim that the food product being misrepresented is healthier. For example, many food producers and sellers in major cities use eco-labels for their products but do not provide evidence that such products meet the criteria for organic food. It has also been found that many farmers who claim to apply good agricultural practices use fertilisers and pesticides when growing their products. Despite these unfair agricultural practices demand for organic products is expected to continue, although consumers are still concerned about the contrast between image and reality and may still doubt claims about organic food. This study aims to explore consumers' perceptions and experiences of greenwashing tactics employed by Slovak businesses. The main research question we focus our attention on is: "What are Slovak consumers' experiences and perceptions of the greenwashing tactics used by Slovak businesses, within the framework of environmental health policy?"

1. The Conceptual Framework

Greenwashing has become a prominent issue in today's corporate landscape, with companies misleading consumers through

false claims of environmental sustainability. In the context of Slovakia, it is crucial to examine greenwashing practices through a social-ecological model that considers the unique national perspective. The social-ecological model of Bornstein and Davis (2014) was chosen and adapted by the authors of the paper for greenwashing because it offers a holistic framework to analyse sustainability challenges by encompassing multiple levels of influence. This section explains the model's application in sustainability contexts and explores: the individual interpersonal determinants of the consumer; marketing, organisational determinants of brands, Slovak Public Environmental and Health Policy, environmental sustainability, and ecological protection. It emphasises the role of consumer behaviour, education, social norms, corporate responsibility, government policies and local communities in addressing greenwashing.

In this study, we interpret the simple levels of the social-ecological model as follows: it depends on each *individual customer* as to which product they choose and whether they are willing to buy a product that is more environmentally friendly, even if the price is higher. This attitude can be influenced by several factors, such as the socio-economic situation or the attitude values towards the protection of the environment the individual gained as part of their upbringing. *Interpersonal determinants of consumer behaviour* include culture, social and family influence. Culture is the values, beliefs, preferences, and tastes transferred from one generation to the next generation. Brand orientation, well-balanced communication, brand performance, the quality of products, brand image, strategic brand management or brand awareness can be defined as the *marketing and organisational determinants of brands* which have an impact on customers.

Slovak national policies on climate change adaptation and national health strategies described and identified the coverage of climate-related impacts on health (physical,

mental, and social) and the types of interventions addressing them. Using analysis from the EEA report *Climate Change and Health*, the Slovak authorities prepared the policy document *Adaptation Plan for Implementation of the Adaptation Strategy to Climate Change of the Slovak Republic* (2021), which includes mental and physical health impacts. In addition, the vision of the Slovak document *Envirostrategy 2030* is to achieve better environmental quality and sustainable circulation of the economy, which is based on rigorous protection of environmental compartments and using as few non-renewable natural resources and hazardous substances as possible, which will lead to improving the health of the population. Environmental protection and sustainable consumption are a part of the general awareness of citizens and policymakers. Through the prevention of and adaptation to climate change in Slovakia, the consequences will be reduced as much as possible. These conceptual documents are an important part of the *Slovak Public Environmental and Health Policy*, which is related to the challenges of greenwashing from a broader environmental point of view. The last level of the socio-ecological model is *Environmental sustainability and ecological protection*, which encompasses the responsibility to conserve natural resources and protect global ecosystems to promote health and well-being, both now and in the future. At this level companies must implement green thinking in their business model, with the aim of environmental sustainability and ecoprotection.

All the points mentioned demonstrate the wide range of linkages between society, individual behaviour and ecosystem relationships.

2. Materials and Methods

This study used an inductive qualitative research design (Azungah 2018, 385–386) following the Consolidated Criteria for Reporting Qualitative Research (COREQ), with focus group interviews to collect data



Figure 1. A Social-Ecological Model Adapted for Greenwashing based on Bornstein and Davis (2014). Source: Own elaboration, 2023

using purposive sampling (Tong, Sainsbury and Craig 2007, 350–355). The current study used data from three focus group interviews. Focus group interviews allow individuals to explain, in their own words, how they understand and interpret the world around them, variations, and different aspects of experience on a selected topic (Knott et al. 2022, 1–14). The study was approved and supported by the Ministry of Education of the Slovak Republic (1/2022; EEA and Norway Grants 2014–2021). All procedures were conducted in accordance with the Declaration of Helsinki.

2.1. Sample and Data Collection

There were 14 participants in this research and data collection was performed in November and December 2022. The research sample consisted of nine females and five males, which, after rounding, amounted to a sample consisting of 64% of females and 36% of males aged between 20 and 45 years. Criterion sampling was used for recruitment based on age (20–50 years), a minimum of secondary education, and residence in Slovakia. For recruitment purposes, a QR code was generated and shared through social media (Facebook), the university website, and a newsletter distributed

by email. After scanning, potential interview participants were shown more detailed information about the goals of the research study and information on how to contact the researcher for the purpose of data collection. Recruitment was based on a random selection of participants and later through the snowball method (Parker, Scott, Geddes 2019). Participants were required to be at least 18 years of age and provide written informed consent to participate in a focus group interview.

2.2. Data Analysis

The focus group interviews were transcribed verbatim by the first two authors. The material was then analysed with a qualitative thematic analysis. A reflexive thematic analysis approach offers a theoretically flexible method and was used to generate themes from the participants' narratives which are particular patterns of shared meaning (Braun and Clarke 2019, 590–596). The joint first authors (AS, KI) facilitated the interviews which triggered initial thoughts about the data. After the interviews were transcribed, each author read the transcripts in their entirety. The data analysis was conducted by hand. AS led the thematic analysis, coding meaningful words and segments

Table 1. Examples of data analysis regarding a qualitative thematic analysis

Data extract units of data	Early descriptive codes/ line-by-line coding	Broad initial theme
... the composition of the fabric is really synthetic! (P6)	The brands are not honest	Determinants of brands
If something is to be cheap, it can't be green or eco... (P12)	The price is the deciding factor	-
"I try to stay away from the big mainstream stuff because I think it's false advertising and not actual reality." (P14)	Importance of eco products	-

of text relevant to the research question, before synthesising these codes to develop an initial mind map describing tentative descriptive themes. The third author was also involved in this process (MT). Data extracts containing units of data and line-by-line coding with a broad initial theme are illustrated in Table 1 (Noble and Smith 2014). This example of data analysis is important in demonstrating transparency, validity, and reliability.

3. Findings and Discussion

Fourteen participants were interviewed; the average interview length was 37 minutes, with interviews taking from 26 to 93 min. Participants ranged from 20 to 45 years of age (see Table 2). The average participatory age was 30.

The analysis identified four overarching themes: 1. Individual and interpersonal determinants of consumers; 2. Marketing and organisational determinants of brands; 3. Slovak Public Environmental and Health Policy, and 4. Environmental sustainability and ecological protection.

4. Individual and Interpersonal Determinants of Consumers

We consider it important to differentiate between consumers' experiences related to the occurrence of greenwashing (assessment of companies' behaviour), consumers' conscious actions to avoid it and buy eco-products, and companies' actual strategies.

Most of the questions explored Slovak consumers' experiences with greenwashing and the negative effects of greenwashing

on consumers, as relatively few studies have looked at the mediated mechanisms of psychological change in individual consumers. On the one hand, it is important to understand the psychological changes in individual consumers' perceptions of greenwashing, which can help businesses to reduce the losses caused by greenwashing behaviour and save their economic performance and brand equity loss; on the other hand, it is valuable for relevant government authorities to implement targeted measures to address consumers' trust in green consumption and moral crisis.

Based on the responses and discussions held on this topic, it can be assessed that all participants in the discussions are aware of the problem of deceiving or misleading businesses in a green marketing environment (consumers' conscious actions). Most of the participants were immediately able to name a few industries or specific brands where they had encountered this problem. As one participant (P4, male) stated: "I see it a lot with multinational corporations. It seems to me that every company suddenly wants to be eco."

In the interview, participants mentioned several forms of greenwashing they had encountered. The most frequently mentioned was the clothing industry, either fast fashion chains in general or specific examples of the retailers in question. Participants also pointed to the fact that products are often produced in more than one location, which does not add to their environmental friendliness. Participants also noted that even though retailers may create specific

Table 2. Characteristics of participants

Focus group 1	Focus group 2	Focus group 3
Participant 1: Male aged 25	Participant 6: Female aged 22	Participant 10: Male aged 45
Participant 2: Male, 31	Participant 7: Female, 24	Participant 11: Female, 32
Participant 3: Female, 20	Participant 8: Female, 23	Participant 12: Female, 39
Participant 4: Male, 38	Participant 9: Female, 25	Participant 13: Female, 43
Participant 5: Female, 26		Participant 14: Male, 30

greener collections the chain could still be very non-organic, and they would not necessarily trust a given sustainable collection. For an illustration of the experience, one of the female participants (P5, female) stated: “Yes, I know, and I have encountered it in clothing, just fast fashion. Some brands have an organic, eco section. Yes, it can be made a little bit more environmentally friendly, but the money you put in there just goes into the whole industry.”

Another industry often discussed in connection with greenwashing was the cosmetics and drugstore industry. Participants quoted two cases where cosmetic products were presented as natural or not tested on animals, whereas in reality this was not the case. “Many times, I was willing to pay extra for cosmetics because the packaging said it was not tested on animals and then I read that it was not true” (P3, female). The other participant (P13, female) pointed out that she will pay more for eco food “directly from the farm because I believe that the products are really ecological. But most of my friends told me that I am naive and shouldn’t believe it.” According to interpersonal theory, a sense of betrayal is a psychological reaction that occurs when an individual is confronted with inappropriate behaviour by others with whom he or she is interacting. In the marketing field, perceived betrayal is used to measure the extent to which consumers believe that the norms of interaction between them and the firm have been intentionally violated by the firm. It has been suggested that consumers’ attitudes towards companies are largely influenced by companies’ attitudes towards

socially responsible behaviour (Sun and Shi 2022, 2–13).

Participants also stressed the importance of reviews from other consumers. According to many participants (12 of 14) the reviews should be positive, and in the case of public reviews should be numerous and new ones posted regularly. When the number of reviews is low, excluding a newly launched product, the respondents get the opposite impression. Product reviews are an important area for consumers and retailers and sharing pleasant experiences may increase trust in the product and the producers, inclusive of eco-friendly products. Another feature that helps participants identify whether a product is “green” is the composition of the products themselves. Respondents mentioned this factor was relevant particularly when applied to cosmetics and food. The formulation factor of the product includes the use or elimination of a particular ingredient, the transparent indication of the origin of the ingredients and the overall environmental impact of the product formulation. A female participant (P6) said: “... the product inspires confidence if its price is higher.”

Exposing greenwashing in politics is crucial to protecting Slovakia’s sustainability efforts. By analysing greenwashing practices, understanding their implications and promoting transparency, Slovakia can support real environmental progress. During this process, it is important to disseminate the main information and strategies on how individual customers can check the authenticity of ecological products through public and social media.

5. Marketing and Organisational Determinants of Brands

A positive brand image is essential for building trust and credibility. Organisations must proactively manage their brand reputation by ensuring consistent delivery of high-quality products or services. Effective brand communication strategies, both internally and externally, enable organisations to articulate their brand story, values, and unique selling propositions. Leveraging public relations and brand ambassadors further amplifies the brand message and generates positive associations. A brand that builds a green image affects both how it is perceived and the purchasing decisions of its customers. In recent years, brand statements and the use of symbols referring to ecology and the relationship with nature have been directed at consumers from all sides.

Most participants (11 of 14) admitted that these practices are difficult to detect in practice. Participant P10 (male) explained: "I don't think it's possible to spot." Nevertheless, there are certain features that help respondents recognise greenwashing, the most frequently mentioned being visuals or product packaging, along with various labels and certifications. Another example that was often cited, even in the case of a new organic collection, was companies that are generally no longer trusted. Yet another example was the size of businesses. Participant P14 (male) stressed: "I try to stay away from the big mainstream stuff because I think it's false advertising and not actual reality." A very frequently cited feature that helps participants detect greenwashing is a low price. A female participant (P12, female) said: "For me, it all comes down to price. If something is to be cheap, it can't be green or eco." One section of the participants reported that they often purchase the so-called eco-products with lower prices, whereas half of the participants reported that they only buy such products occasionally. There were several reasons for this; Participants P7 and P6, both female, agreed that it is difficult for consumers to navigate or

trust green marketing and confirmed it with their experiences: "When I see the eco-cotton brand and hold the material in my hand, I can feel it is synthetic. And finally, the composition of the fabric is really synthetic! How can I believe that it is eco-cotton?" (P6). "... and I know that this piece of clothing has flown half the globe... so what's ecological about it?" (P7). Not everything is credible and true in the opinion of consumers; in some cases, they are sceptical of marketing claims and green marketing can irritate them because it is applied to products which cannot logically be truly eco.

This result correlates with a study by Yang and Nguyen (2020, 1 503) who reported that consumers are increasingly sceptical of businesses that use the green trend because buyers nowadays have some knowledge about greenwashing, which significantly influences their attitude towards brand, green brand equity and purchase intention. According to Hernikova (2015, 266), greenwashing is an obvious communication of environmental concern suggesting that a product is environmentally friendly, or that the company itself is environmentally sensitive. Although this statement may not be wholly true it is used by the company to create an image of a socially responsible enterprise. Doyle (2011, 40) defines greenwashing as overemphasis of a company's environmental awareness, often by misinforming the public or downplaying potentially harmful activities. Ginsberg and Bloom (2004, 81) explain greenwashing as misleading or deceptive environmental claims and point out that customers are still concerned about this issue. Green awareness has been identified as an important precursor to green consumer behaviour and recognised as an important precursor to green consumer behaviour (Sharma 2021).

However, it is important to note that awareness does not necessarily mean understanding; it may simply be the ability to be aware, to feel or to perceive. Currently, the media plays a significant role in creating awareness and educating people

about the benefits of environmental protection for society. Businesses are also trying to develop awareness of environmental issues and green products by influencing consumer purchasing behaviour. Consumer awareness is important in overcoming uncertainty about new, greener product options. Advertising the new advantages and benefits of such products helps consumers to become more aware of the environmental damage so that they potentially change their purchasing habits.

6. Slovak Public Environmental and Health Policy

Greenwashing, a deceptive practice used by companies and politicians, is an enhanced or misleading image of environmental responsibility. By using this tactic, organisations seek to capitalise on the growing demand for sustainable practices. In this section, respondents evaluate Slovak Public Environmental and Health policies and their approach to greenwashing. Understanding the different forms of greenwashing allows citizens to make informed decisions, which promotes real environmental progress. Slovakia, like many other countries, recognises the importance of environmental sustainability. The implications of greenwashing in politics go far beyond superficial deception. A male participant (P1) opined that: "... Slovakia's policy should address the implications of greenwashing for sustainability goals. The systemic impacts and potential dangers that misleading information poses to consumers should be examined." A female participant (P11) expressed: "I know that Slovak politicians who are working at the European Commission are very active in this topic. But it is not enough. We need particularly tailored interventions for all EU countries." Another female participant (P13) reflected and asked openly in the focus group: "...but... what about the rest of the world?! China and the USA should be doing the most for the citizens of this planet and ecology!"

Increased disclosure of environmental information without apparent substantial

improvements in environmental performance has generated justified scepticism about the gap between what businesses say and what they do regarding environmental issues (Bowen and Aragon-Correa 2014, 110). If a company wants to gain a sustainable competitive advantage, it must integrate environmental thinking into all aspects of marketing. This will only be achieved through the implementation of a green marketing strategy, as addressing environmental issues and the level of implementation of green marketing principles has become a fundamental prerequisite for future competition, which will benefit from higher profitability, competitive advantage, better stakeholder relations and improved environmental performance. As part of the public environmental and health policy of the Slovak Republic, it is necessary to support companies to increase the implementation of green marketing strategies, which have and will have a greater impact on public health and environmental protection. An example could be increased subsidies for those agriculture and animal breeding practices which produce goods using ecologically traditional ways. By adopting the principles of green marketing, a company increases the value of its products and gains a competitive advantage, improves its image, gets opportunities to expand into new markets and is better able to cope with environmental pressures. This is confirmed in a study (Moravcikova, Krizanova, Kliestikova and Rypakova 2017, 4–9) looking at the position of the majority of industry enterprises towards green marketing in Slovakia, in which the relationship between the competitive position of the enterprise in the market and the implementation of green marketing principles was examined.

7. Environmental Sustainability and Ecological Protection

From the results of the participants' interviews, it can be said that all our participants in this study are aware that green products exist. The vast majority take notice of these

products and consider them a trend that cannot be overlooked, and they are most often noticed in the food, clothing and cosmetics industries; the participants also gave examples from the services sector. They are also willing to pay extra for green products. Participant P2 (male) says: "... I prefer to buy products that are made of recyclable material. I try to limit buying products in plastic packaging. When it comes to drugstores, I also look out for products with an eco-label." Furthermore, participant P8 (female) commented: "I notice products in green colours and try to buy more things which are environmentally friendly. For example, I don't put vegetables in plastic bags. I also shop for clothes in second-hand stores so as not to encourage the growth of fashion..." Another participant (P9, female) admitted: "I'm not convinced that anything with an eco-connotation is really eco-friendly either. A typical example is eco-cotton. I feel that many companies only do PR on the mark as 'eco'. But yes, I do register the visual of the organic label..."

Participants most frequently mentioned various green labels on products, visual product labels, packaging material and product packaging visuals. This finding is also supported by research from Schmuck, Matthes and Naderer (2018, 130-133), which found that advertising strategies which play on the emotions, such as using pleasing images of nature, are able to affect the critical insight of consumers, even highly informed ones. It should be added that some participants stated that they realise these visual representations may not be entirely credible, but it is true that they are noticed more often. Greenwashing also hinders consumers from understanding the impact of their purchasing decisions as they struggle to distinguish between valid and invalid claims. Several studies confirmed (Sheehy and Farneti 2021; Siltaloppi, Rajala, and Hietala 2021) that when the values of honesty, transparency, openness and social responsibility of companies towards the environment are threatened, i.e., when

the company presents something that creates a disparity with the reality of environmental action, we can state that such action becomes unethical and damages the ethical foundations of business in the long term. Unfair greenwashing practices have an impact on global environmental sustainability and ecological protection in the future.

8. Strengths and Limitations of the Study

We consider the qualitative approach using focus group discussions as the first strength of this study. Focus groups are a naturalistic (i.e., close to the everyday conversation) approach and interviews provide a space for extended conversations that allow the researcher insights into how people think and what they believe (Knott, Rao, Summers and Teeger 2022, 7). Secondly, in order to increase internal validity, the interviews were all led by researchers with experience in qualitative research who supervised the data analysis. The data of this study is based on a small group of participants in the focus group interview, which counted as a limitation. Considering we have no data on socio-economical background factors our sample may not be representative of the general Slovak population. Future research could focus on exploring generational product preferences and expanding the number of participants. Akturan (2018, 820) observes differences in the impact of greenwashing on consumers between low and high-involvement products, and it could therefore be beneficial in future research to explore generational preferences for high-involvement products in a similar way. Good candidates for such a product are, for example, cars or more expensive electronics.

Conclusion

The aim of this study was to explore Slovak consumers' perceptions and experiences of greenwashing tactics employed by businesses within environmental health policy. Corporate practices to reduce greenwashing leading to sustainability of the environment and ecological protection on a global

scale should be supported by the interventions of regulatory bodies, both at the European and global levels. The findings pointed out that greenwashing is the selective publication of positive information, without full disclosure of negative information, to create an overly positive corporate image. This leads to a reliance on businesses that represent their environmental quality through environmental reports, advertising, corporate websites, or green labelling schemes. The findings show that it is quite difficult for Slovak participants to recognise greenwashing, and some of them admitted that they only became aware of corporate misleading after the issue was highlighted in the media. Empowering people by educating them to discern misleading practices of greenwashing is as essential as the enforcement of sustainability of the environment.

The idea of green marketing can be understood as the undertaking of marketing operations to stimulate and sustain pro-environmental consumer behaviour and attitudes. One solution could be disseminating information on how customers can verify the authenticity of organic products through public and social media. Recently, the emerging view in the European Union is that the rules of operation for green marketing need to change. Focus group interviews with our participants have demonstrated that, ultimately, greenwashing is a barrier to the development of a sustainable economy. The present study has important implications for policymakers, providers of public information, educators and educational institutions and its findings spread awareness of greenwashing issues in Slovakia. The results show support for transparency, accountability, and authenticity in the efforts for a greener Slovakia, promoting responsible consumption and supporting ethical brands.

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