



GUARDIANS OF TRUTH

Empowering Youth Against

Greenwashing

Toolkit - Part 1

Concept and types of Greenwashing

About greenwashing in Bulgaria, Germany, the Netherlands and Turkey – practices and possibilities in education, empowerment and engagement of young people against greenwashing.

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About the Project

This report comes from the "Guardians of Truth" Erasmus+ KA210 Youth Project, which kicked off in September 2024. It's funded by the European Union, and the goal is to make young people and youth workers stronger against greenwashing.

Our project is a joint effort by four awesome organizations:

- Alternativi International from Blagoevgrad, Bulgaria
- Impactgrid e.V. from Berlin, Germany
- Stichting The Tree Party from Utrecht, The Netherlands
- Nicea Culture and Education Association from Iznik, Turkey

WHAT'S IN THIS MATERIAL?

MATERIAL 1

- Understanding the concept and types of greenwashing
- Curriculum and awareness deficiency
- Advertising and social media tactics that mislead consumers

MATERIAL 2:

- Difficulty identifying greenwashing
- Greenwashing in key sectors (fashion, food, energy, cosmetics)
- Impact of greenwashing on climate change and sustainability

MATERIAL 3:

- Fragmented education and lack of national strategy
- Developing critical thinking and fact-checking skills

MATERIAL 4:

- Urban-rural divide and low trust
- Equipping youth with tools to become sustainable and responsible consumers



MATERIAL 1

- Participants will be able to define greenwashing and identify its main types and common tactics used by companies and on social media.
- Participants will learn to critically evaluate environmental claims in advertisements and social media posts using basic verification steps and regulatory guidance.
- Participants will design ethical and evidence-based communications (counter-ads or awareness posts) that do not mislead consumers.
- Participants will develop a small local awareness action plan to reduce greenwashing influence among peers.



After reading the material, the participants will be able to:

- Recognise and name at least five common greenwashing tactics (e.g., vagueness, hidden trade-offs, no proof).
- Use a short checklist (3-5 items) to verify the credibility of an environmental claim online.
- Produce a short social-media post or poster that accurately communicates an environmental claim with sources and limits.
- Explain why formal curriculum gaps make youth vulnerable to misleading green claims and propose one educational fix.

Understanding Greenwashing: Definition, Motivations and Consequences

Greenwashing describes the practice of presenting an organisation, product, or service as more environmentally responsible than it truly is. The term, introduced by environmentalist Jay Westerveld in 1986, has become increasingly relevant as consumers' environmental awareness has grown and sustainability has become a core part of brand identity. Greenwashing manipulates this awareness by using misleading, exaggerated, vague, or unverifiable environmental claims to create a false impression of sustainability.

Why Greenwashing Matters?

Greenwashing harms both society and the environment by:

- **Undermining consumer trust:** When consumers discover that claims are misleading, skepticism grows, making it harder for genuinely sustainable companies to gain support.
- **Slowing climate action:** False claims obscure the real environmental impacts of products and discourage actual improvements in production systems.
- **Creating unfair competition:** Companies making costly sustainability improvements are placed at a disadvantage against those who merely claim to do so.
- **Misleading youth and educators:** Without strong environmental literacy, young people become vulnerable to persuasive and deceptive messaging.
- **OECD reports (2025)** highlight that misleading environmental claims can significantly hamper the global transition to sustainable consumption and production.

Why Companies Engage in Greenwashing

The main motivations include:

Market advantage: As consumers prefer environmentally responsible products, brands use “green” messaging to capture demand—even when their practices do not align with sustainability principles.

Reputation management: Companies attempt to enhance their public image or distract from harmful practices by highlighting minor or irrelevant environmental efforts.

Regulatory pressure: Firms may create selective or symbolic sustainability messaging to appear compliant with regulations or international standards without making substantial operational changes.

Cost avoidance: Genuine sustainability transitions require investments in materials, processes, and auditing. Greenwashing offers a cheaper, superficial alternative.



Main Types and Taxonomies of Greenwashing

Various researchers and organisations have proposed classifications to help identify and analyse greenwashing. One of the most influential frameworks is the “Seven Sins of Greenwashing” developed by TerraChoice, widely used by educators, regulators, and consumer advocacy organisations.

The Seven Sins of Greenwashing (TerraChoice)



SIN 1: THE SIN OF HIDDEN TRADE-OFF

Highlighting one positive environmental attribute while ignoring larger negative impacts.
Example: Claiming “recyclable packaging” while the product itself has a high carbon footprint.

SIN 2: THE SIN OF NO PROOF

Making claims that cannot be verified with accessible evidence, certifications, or credible sources.

SIN 3: THE SIN OF VAGUENESS

Using broad, unclear terms like “eco-friendly,” “clean,” or “green” without explaining what they mean.

SIN 5: THE SIN OF LESSER OF TWO EVILS

Claiming to be more “green” within a fundamentally harmful product category (e.g., “eco cigarettes”).

SIN 4: THE SIN OF IRRELEVANCE

Providing information that is true but meaningless for environmental performance.
Example: “CFC-free” for products where CFCs have been banned for decades.

SIN 6: THE SIN OF FIBBING

Making claims that are simply false.

SIN 7: THE SIN OF WORSHIPPING FALSE LABELS

Using fake labels, logos, or symbols to imply third-party certification where none exists.

This taxonomy is practical and can be easily applied to assess advertisements and social media posts.

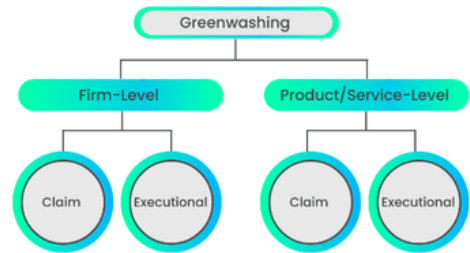
ACADEMIC CLASSIFICATIONS OF GREENWASHING

Academic literature provides additional dimensions that deepen understanding:

- Executional Greenwashing vs Claim Greenwashing
- Claim greenwashing: Misleading environmental statements (e.g., exaggerations or incomplete claims).
- Executional greenwashing: Use of visual elements—such as green colours, nature images, or soothing language—to imply environmental friendliness without actual proof.

Firm-Level vs Product-Level Greenwashing

- **Firm-level:** The entire company portrays itself as sustainable, while only a small portion of its operations is environmentally responsible.
- **Product-level:** Specific products are marketed as green while the company's overall practices remain unsustainable.



Intentional vs Unintentional Greenwashing

- **Intentional:** Deliberately misrepresenting environmental benefits.
- **Unintentional:** Poor communication, lack of data, or misunderstanding of sustainability standards leads to inaccurate claims.

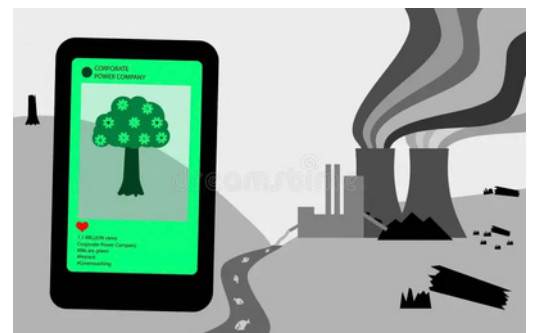
These categories help youth evaluate not only the content of a claim but also its context and strategic purpose.

HOW ADVERTISING AND SOCIAL MEDIA AMPLIFY GREENWASHING

Modern greenwashing spreads rapidly because of how digital media functions. Advertising is no longer limited to traditional channels—brands now use micro-influencers, targeted campaigns, and algorithm-driven platforms to reach young consumers.

The Role of Digital Marketing

- Social media platforms encourage short, emotional, image-heavy content. This environment enables:
- Quick spread of vague buzzwords (“eco,” “natural,” “green,” “clean materials”).
- Use of nature-based imagery (plants, forests, water) to imply sustainability without evidence.
- Promotion of limited, selective stories (e.g., one recycled component) while ignoring larger environmental harms.



Because these posts are brief and visually appealing, users rarely question their accuracy.



Influencers as Greenwashing Amplifiers

Influencers frequently share sponsored posts about “eco-friendly” or “sustainable” products without evaluating evidence. According to EU consumer guidelines, influencers must disclose sponsorships and avoid making unverifiable claims. However, violations are widespread, especially among lifestyle and wellness accounts targeting young people.

Greenwashing Through Omission

Brands may not lie directly; instead, they:

- Omit critical information (e.g., production emissions)
- Highlight only minor improvements
- Use ambiguous phrases such as “moving toward sustainability,” “planet-positive,” or “clean production”
- This type of incomplete communication is harder for consumers to detect.



Regulatory Guidance

Regulators stress that environmental claims must be clear, accurate, and supported by evidence:

- The FTC Green Guides (USA) outline how brands should substantiate environmental claims.
- The EU Green Claims Initiative bans vague or unsupported language in green advertising.
- National advertising authorities (e.g., ASA in the UK) regularly investigate environmental claims.

Despite regulation, enforcement struggles to keep up with the speed and volume of digital content.

Curriculum and Awareness Deficiency

Young people are deeply concerned about climate change, yet research (UNESCO, OECD, and national education reviews) shows a significant mismatch between environmental awareness and critical media literacy skills. This gap creates a vulnerable environment where greenwashing can easily influence behaviour.

Gaps in School Curricula

Most education systems focus on the science of climate change and recycling and basic sustainability concepts.

However, they rarely include:

- How to analyse environmental claims
- How to verify sources
- How to identify deceptive marketing
- How to evaluate certification labels or lifecycle assessments
- How to recognise manipulation on social media



This means that even environmentally conscious young people often lack the tools needed to identify greenwashing.

Why Youth Are Highly Exposed

Youth spend large amounts of time on social media platforms—spaces where:

- Content prioritises aesthetics over accuracy
- Sponsored posts and ads blend with regular content
- Algorithms push emotionally appealing sustainability narratives
- Peer influence shapes consumption habits



Without training in media literacy and green claim verification, young people often mistake marketing aesthetics for environmental responsibility.



Building Awareness through Education

By integrating the following skills into youth work and educational programs, organisations can significantly reduce susceptibility to greenwashing:

- i. Understanding sustainability terminology
- ii. Evaluating evidence and certifications
- iii. Recognising misleading marketing techniques
- iiii. Conducting basic fact-checking
- iiiii. Distinguishing real progress from symbolic gestures
- iiiiii. Learning how regulations protect consumers

Practicing these skills empowers young people to be guardians of truth, making informed choices and challenging misleading communication in their personal lives and communities.

Practical Principles for Verifying Environmental Claims

To counter greenwashing, educators and youth can use a simple verification checklist:

1. Ask for Proof

Is there accessible evidence? Certification? Link to a report? Independent verification?

2. Check Scope and Lifecycle

Is the claim about a single attribute while ignoring larger impacts?

3. Look for Certifications

Is the label real? Is the certifying body credible (FSC, EU Ecolabel, Carbon Trust)?

4. Analyse Language

Are terms vague (“eco-friendly,” “natural”) or specific (“50% recycled PET verified by ISO standard”)?

5. Compare Products

Even if the claim is true, is the product category itself harmful or unnecessary?

Teaching young people to use this checklist helps them question marketing narratives and make more informed choices.

5 ACTIVITIES TO BETTER UNDERSTAND THESE INFORMATION



AI: SEVEN SINS DETECTIVE

- Group analysis, role play, media literacy exercise
- Teach participants to identify classic greenwashing tactics in ads and posts
- Projector or printed ads, phones/laptops for research, flipchart papers, markers
- Collect 8-12 real ads / social posts (brands + NGOs allowed) showing claims (print or screenshots). Prepare “Seven Sins” reference handout.



- Icebreaker (10 min): “Green Bingo” / quick 5-minute bingo: participants have a bingo card with terms (eco, natural, zero-waste, recyclable, biodegradable, certified, organic). Find people who’ve seen an ad with that term. Builds speed and team mixing.
- Intro (10 min): Short presentation: definition of greenwashing + 7 sins checklist.
- Main (45-60 min): Divide into small teams (3-5 people). Each team gets 2 ads/posts. They analyze: which “sin(s)” apply, what evidence is missing, propose a 1-sentence rewrite that would be honest. Use phones to verify claims (look for certifications, lifecycle info etc).
- Plenary (20 min): Teams present findings; group votes on the most misleading claim and best honest rewrite.
- Participants: 10-30
- Duration: 90 min.

- Rubric scoring (accuracy of sin identification, evidence found, quality of rewrite). Trainer checks sources cited by teams (pass/fail)
- Provide quick links to FTC Green Guides and EU green claims page. Encourage respectful critique - distinguish between good attempts and malicious deception.



A2: CLAIM VERIFICATION LAB

- Research sprint, fact-checking, peer teaching.
- Practice verification: find original source data and third-party certs for a claim.
- Laptops/tablets, shared spreadsheet or Jamboard, internet access.
- Prepare 6 sample claims (e.g., “50% recycled content”, “carbon neutral”, “biodegradable”). Provide short how-to on using Google site, checking certifications, and checking lifecycle claims.



- Icebreaker (10 min): “Two Truths & A Claim” – participants say two true environmental facts and invent one environmental claim; group guesses the invented one.
- Main (60 min): Teams each take one claim and research: is there a standard/cert, can the claim be substantiated, find manufacturer statements and lifecycle reports. Document sources in the shared sheet.
- Reflection (20 min): Teams report whether claim is substantiated; propose label improvements or disclaimers.
- Participants: 6-24.
- Duration: 90 min.

- Each team submits a one-page evidence sheet; trainer scores on evidence quality and correct use of verification steps (checklist).
- Teach quick verification shortcuts (site:companydomain.com, looking for PDF reports, checking cert bodies like FSC, EU Ecolabel).



A3: DESIGN AN HONEST AD (CREATIVE COUNTER-MESSAGING)

- Design sprint, peer feedback, creative writing.
- Create an accurate, persuasive alternative communication that explains limits and provides evidence.
- Please specify the tools that needed for your activity
- Paper, marker pens, phones for images, Canva or similar (optional).
- For preparation, the trainer will need an example of a misleading ad from Activity 1; design brief template.



- Icebreaker (10 min): "Pitch in 30 seconds" – random product + environmental attribute; groups craft a quick honest pitch.
- Main (60-75 min): Groups craft a new ad/post that corrects misleading language, adds a brief evidence line (e.g., "20% recycled content – verified by X standard; lifecycle excludes shipping"), and an actionable consumer tip. They produce a mock-post (image + caption).
- Showcase (20 min): Social media gallery walk; groups vote for clarity and honesty.
- Participants: 8-30.
- Duration: 90-110 min.

- Peer review sheet scoring clarity, evidence, and persuasiveness. Trainer awards "Most Honest" and gives feedback.
- Push for short, clear evidence lines and link to sources. Emphasize that transparency can still be persuasive.



A4: SOCIAL MEDIA AUDIT

- Audit, role play, policy mapping
- Teach participants to audit a brand or influencer account for greenwashing signals and to prepare a short report.
- Phones/laptops, audit checklist template, presentation slides.
- Choose 3-5 public influencer or brand accounts (or let each team pick one) and prepare an audit template based on “Seven Sins” + checklist.



- Icebreaker (10 min): “Favourite Ad” quick shares.
- Main (60 min): Teams audit posts over the last 6 months: tag examples of vague language, missing proof, and use of nature imagery. Rate the account’s transparency 1-5 and suggest improvements.
- Role play (20 min): One team plays the brand and responds to critiques; others act as community or regulator.
- Participants: 8-24.
- Duration: 90 min.

- Written audit and one-minute improvement pitch. Trainer checks audit quality against checklist.
- Remind participants about ethical use of screenshots and respectful public critiques. For real brands, use constructive feedback.



A5: CURRICULUM HACKATHON: TEACHING OTHERS

- Co-creation, curriculum design, presentation.
- Create a 30-minute lesson or workshop segment to teach peers about greenwashing and claim verification.
- Templates for lesson plan, laptop, poster paper.
- Provide lesson plan template (learning objectives, activities, assessment, resources). Provide links to regulatory guidance and toolkits.



- Icebreaker (15 min): “Teachback” pairs, each person explains one verification tip to partner.
- Main (90 min): Teams design a 30-minute lesson segment (includes 1 icebreaker, 1 main activity, 1 assessment). They produce a trainer tips sheet.
- Show & Feedback (30 min): Micro-teach 5-7 minutes each; peers give structured feedback.
- Participants: 6-20.
- Duration: ~2.5-3 hours.

- Use a rubric that checks clarity of objectives, fit to target group, and feasibility. Trainer compiles best versions.
- Encourage modularity (so segments can be dropped into school or club sessions). Include a one-page cheat sheet for youth workers.



MATERIAL 1 EVALUATION

1. If an ad says 'eco-friendly' with no evidence, it is always a reliable claim.
 - a. Answer: False
2. Which of these is a TerraChoice "sin" of greenwashing?
 - a. Full transparency
 - b. **Vagueness**
 - c. Lifecycle accounting
 - d. Third-party certification
3. Which step is MOST important when verifying a green claim?
 - a. Checking if the ad uses green colours
 - b. Checking the company's Instagram likes
 - c. **Asking for independent evidence or certification**
 - d. Counting hashtags
4. claim that only refers to one small environmental attribute while ignoring others is called a hidden trade-off.
 - a. Answer: True
5. Which regulator's guidance helps US marketers avoid misleading green claims?
 - a. European Commission only#
 - b. **Federal Trade Commission (FTC)**
 - c. UNESCO
 - d. None of the above
6. The checklist to detect greenwashing should include:
 - a. **Evidence, scope/lifecycle, certs, precise language, All of these**
 - b. Only images used
 - c. Only price point
 - d. Only influencer count
7. Third-party certifications always guarantee a product is completely sustainable.
 - a. Answer: False
8. Which social-media behavior often helps greenwashing spread?
 - a. Long, detailed lifecycle reports only
 - b. **Short image-first posts with vague buzzwords**
 - c. Peer-reviewed papers posted by brands
 - d. Full transparency statements
9. A responsible social-media post that wants to avoid greenwashing should:
 - a. Use only the word 'natural' without explanation
 - b. **State the claim and link to the evidence or limits**
 - c. Hide negative aspects
 - d. Use lots of nature photography to imply sustainability
10. Teaching claim-verification in youth curricula can reduce greenwashing vulnerability.
 - a. Answer: True



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