

Greenwashing and the Media

Greenwashing is a type of media presentation where companies seek to project an image of environmentally sound business practices through the use of ambiguous, misleading, and even false advertising. Activities examine what roles does the federal or state government have, if any, in regulating deceptive greenwashing practices and how can students and teachers act as ethical consumers who support accurate marketing while rejecting false presentations and claims.

"Time to do the washing."

What do you think of when you hear that phrase?

It used to be all about getting clean clothes, sheets, and towels by doing the laundry. But now, as language evolves and meanings change, online and print media is **awash in greenwashing** by which companies and product brands portray themselves in the media as environmentally concerned businesses when in fact they are not.



"[Earth Friendly Label](#)" by Clker-Free-Vector-Images | Pixabay

In stories and online, it is common to view green-inspired advertising. Much of these media presentations accurately represent the values and practices of manufacturers and distributors. Companies like Patagonia (clothing); Seventh Generation (personal care and cleaning products); Numi Organic Tea; Allbirds (footwear); Pela (phone cases); and Preserve (toothbrushes) have long records of eco-friendly, sustainable business and advertising practices ([The 15 Most Environmentally Friendly & Sustainable Companies, 2022](#). Grow Ensemble).

Other companies have been less successful record in implementing sustainability practices: McDonalds introduced paper straws in 2019 that were not recyclable; H&M's Conscious Collection clothing was made with a high percentage of synthetic rather than organic materials; IKEA sold beechwood chairs made from illegally sourced wood; Windex used ingredients found harmful to people and animals in its sprays; Hefy claimed its plastic bags were recyclable when they were not ([Greenwashing: 10 Recent Stand-Out Examples](#). Akepa, July 23, 2021).

Other companies are engaging in "**greenhushing**," where they deliberately do not discuss their sustainability initiatives to avoid criticism from political groups (*The New York Times* Sunday Business, April 23, 2023, p. 3).

Greenwashing has led to other forms of color washing by businesses and brands:

- **Pink Washing** involves claims of support for breast cancer research.
- **Rainbow Washing** offers claims of support for LGBTQ+ rights.
- **Blue Washing** involves support for initiatives by the United Nations ([Look Out! From Greenwashing to Pinkwashing: Calling Out False Representations](#). Alliance for Sustainability, June 7, 2022).
- **Purpose Washing** involves promoting an organization or product's social and ethical purposes without actually taking any real action to achieve those goals (see [Six Principles to Avoid Purpose Washing](#), Association of National Advertisers).

What other color washing can you identify?

Sportswashing, as explained by Michael Silverman in The Boston Globe (“This Shot Was Way Off Line,” September 2, 2022) involves turning people’s attention away from negative practices in business or politics by promoting sports events and individual athletic stars. Silverman uses LIV Golf, the Saudi Arabian-backed professional golf tour as an example where Saudi government leaders are seeking to use sports to draw attention away from their human rights abuses and repressive practices toward women and LGBTQ+ groups.

Sportswashing can also be found as part of the middle eastern nation Qatar’s hosting of the 2022 Men’s Soccer World Cup. The tournament is seen by many as a way for Qatar’s leaders to distract international attention away from the country’s long record of human rights abuses.

One historian has likened sportswashing to the term “bread and circuses” through which ancient Roman emperors used gladiators and chariot races to distract people from their concerns over hunger and poverty.

Greenwashing and related forms of media washing offer opportunities for teachers and students to critically explore how advertising conveys meanings and messages to readers and viewers.

Activity 1: Advocate for the Regulation of Greenwashing

- Select a local, state, or national government department or office that should be responsible for regulating deceptive greenwashing practices in the media and on consumer products.
- Write a letter or social media post to advocate (to that office/department) for more truthful advertising.

Designing for Learning: Student-Created Activity Example

[Advocate for the Regulation of Greenwashing](#) by Patrick Van Rossem

Activity 2: Produce a Reverse Greenwash Ad Campaign

- Take a product or company that has engaged in greenwashing and rework one of their advertisements to provide a factually accurate presentation of a product.

Designing for Learning: Student-Created Activity Example

[Greenwashing Campaign Revision](#) by Patrick Van Rossem

Additional Resources

- [Build a Student Writing Box](#) with Environmentally-Friendly Writing and Drawing Materials
- [What is Greenwashing](#), Investopedia



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