

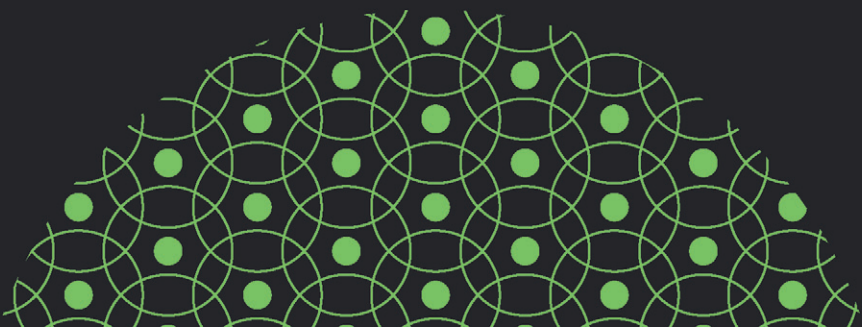


EMERALD POINTS

GREENWASHING

Foundations and Emerging Research
on Corporate Sustainability and
Deceptive Communication

AGOSTINO VOLLERO



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Deceptive Communication

BY

AGOSTINO VOLLERO

Università degli Studi di Salerno, Italy



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INVESTOR IN PEOPLE

To my wife Grazia and my sons Riccardo and Francesco, each of whom has a special place in my heart and inspires me to 'walk the talk'.

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ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Agostino Vollero (PhD) is Associate Professor of Management and Marketing at the Department of Political and Communication Sciences, University of Salerno (Italy), where he teaches Digital Marketing, E-commerce and Place Marketing. His primary research interest focuses on different types of greenwashing in CSR communication. Other main research interests involve online consumer empowerment and marketing communications in sustainable tourism. He has published two books and several articles in leading international journals, including the *Journal of Business Research*, *Journal of Cleaner Production*, *Corporate Social Responsibility and Environmental Management*, *European Management Journal* and *International Journal of Advertising*.

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FOREWORD

The art of rhetoric has characterised the Western world for over two millennia. Compared to Greek civilisation, where rhetoric was theorised and practiced, contemporary globalised and technological society offers extraordinarily greater opportunities to express this particular attitude of writing and speaking in corporate and marketing communications. The opportunities, methods and flows of rhetorical communication are in fact numerous in the era of digital and hyper-communication. These options seem also proliferated with the emergence of corporate sustainability, progressively seen as a co-evolutionary process where companies are called to include social and environmental concerns in their business operations by interacting with their stakeholders.

The main drivers of this increasing use of rhetoric communication are in fact essentially two: (1) the growing interest of stakeholders to be informed on CSR and environmental and social sustainability issues and (2) the tendency of companies to seek social legitimacy by leveraging the potential of multichannel and polycentric communication. Frequently, companies use rhetoric as an expedient to communicate their sustainability efforts in a cosmetic and inauthentic way, thus perpetrating deliberate deception. However, it would be interesting to understand if this is really the way to correctly frame and interpret the phenomenon of greenwashing in corporate sustainability. If the spectrum of greenwashing situations is indeed much broader and more diverse, it is also critical to understand the nuances involved.

At the end of a long and fruitful research path, Agostino Vollero's volume, *Greenwashing/Foundations and emerging research on corporate sustainability and deceptive communication*, provides a valuable window on this issue and fills a gap in the extant literature by offering thought-provoking insights that go well beyond the mainstream assumptions in this field of study.

As for the method, the systematic literature review, the theoretical approaches and research trends, the soundness and rigour of the research design allows the author to deepen and interpret the phenomenon of greenwashing in its various facets and to identify multiple perspectives of analysis. The variety of corporate greenwashing behaviours outlined in Agostino

Vollero's study represents the ideal platform for effectively suggesting managerial principles and guidelines for sustainability communication.

The several elements of originality, combined with methodological rigour, dedication and enthusiasm for in-depth enquiry, make this volume the most complete and stimulating contribution on the theme of greenwashing currently available in the international literature. The appreciation for the results achieved in the book is also justified by the recognition that the subject of study is not easy to deal with. This is because it is intrinsically subtle and elusive, and spans various scientific disciplines, from Management to Marketing Communications, from Accounting to Corporate Communication and Business Ethics. The challenges in greenwashing research are both difficult and interesting. This clear awareness allowed Agostino Vollero to manage the subject without running into convenient but dangerous simplifications or shortcuts. This book is an excellent step towards providing scholars, practitioners, both professionals and students, with an integrated state-of-the-art understanding of greenwashing.

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PREFACE

Communication of sustainability efforts has become crucial for most companies in various industries over the past decade. These growing corporate attempts to disclose organisational policies and practices related to their corporate social and environmental responsibilities are due to several reasons: increasing pressure from stakeholders, being compliant with newer norms or procedures, addressing rising public opinion's concerns in relation to sustainability issues, etc. Potential benefits (e.g. social legitimacy, financial and reputational resources at lower cost) derived from the commitment to sustainability or corporate social responsibility (CSR) have further accelerated this process.

This book aims at providing a comprehensive picture of the dark side of this 'sustainability rush', often described as greenwashing, which refers to the disproportionate focus on the sustainability efforts of a company beyond its corresponding responsible corporate practices. 'Cosmetic' communication practices and questionable CSR practices are more and more recurrent in the context of marketing and corporate communication strategies and often hide the most controversial aspects of corporate sustainability strategies.

Recent cases at firm and industry levels (Volkswagen, plastic pollution and Nestlé, fast-fashion industry, palm oil plantations, etc.) revealed that companies present themselves as 'green' or 'responsible' companies, even if they do not possess the qualities of sustainable entities. Greenwashing practices can also hinder a proper stakeholder/investor assessment of the environmental, social and governance performance of a company, thus affecting the reliability of main sustainability indices (Dow Jones Sustainability Index, MSCI KLD 400 Social Index, FTSE4Good Index, Gender equality index, etc.) and rankings (MSCI ESG Ratings, Sustainalytics' ESG Risk Ratings, Bloomberg ESG disclosure scores, FTSE Russell's ESG Ratings, CSR RepTrak, etc.). The rise of mandatory environmental disclosures (opposed to voluntary reporting) further complicates the situation.

In the current debate on sustainability communication and related degenerative phenomena, scant attention has been paid to 'avoiding bad', which refers to initiatives aimed at preventing socially irresponsible corporate

practices. Recognising the complexity of the phenomenon, this text poses a number of original research questions on the intrinsic nature of greenwashing and seeks to offer a comprehensive view of different approaches to interpret and tackle identity washing communication practices. This book takes a different and integrated approach by challenging dominant themes in the literature and analysing them critically from multiple angles.

From a theoretical point of view, the book in fact sets at the intersection of marketing, management, accounting and corporate communication disciplines and distances itself from the mainstream debate on the communication of CSR that has implicitly acknowledged the idea that greenwashing is only about talking and not doing. On these lines, the text represents an original attempt to shed light on the links between communication and corporate actions. While the gap between symbolic and substantive actions ('talk' versus 'walk') has been the subject of various studies in recent years, a systematic analysis of research approaches and trends in this relevant field of study is lacking.

This book thus provides an extensive and comprehensive look into a complex and growing phenomenon that affects current and future corporate decisions, and it is particularly relevant at this time also in the light of Agenda 2030 for sustainable development and associated sustainable development goals (SDGs), in which the majority of companies are challenged to initiate long-lasting positive change and contribute to the development and prosperity of the global community.

Book Structure

Chapter 1 begins the analysis by showing how the most complex challenges organisations are facing nowadays concern ethical issues in conducting their businesses. The ethical behaviour in organisations represents thus the starting point to discuss the emergence of corporate environmentalism and the rise of greenwashing. Understanding greenwashing inevitably intertwines with corporate sustainability and CSR efforts, and associated mandatory and voluntary reporting activities. Lastly, by discussing deceptive communication used by companies, the concept of greenwashing is expanded by including a much broader range of CSR washing activities.

Chapter 2 examines the state-of-the-art knowledge on greenwashing by means of a systematic literature review, covering a 30-year span (1990–2021). Research design is detailed, along with the description of research objectives, search and refining criteria for selected publications. Results are then discussed, to show the evolutionary trajectories of the research on greenwashing, in terms of leading outlets of publications, entity of analysis, methodologies, type of data collection, tools and research methods used in this field of study.

The chapter ends by clarifying the definitional issues (i.e. the different types of greenwashing) and research gaps identified for each perspective.

Theoretical approaches and research trends are then analysed in Chapter 3. Different theoretical approaches to greenwashing research are examined, contrasted and compared in this chapter. The systematic literature review led to six major theories (legitimacy theory, attribution theory, institutional theory, signaling theory, impression management approach and communicative constitution of organisations), outlining cutting-edge research trends that transcend the traditional dichotomy talk vs. action. The novel questions emerging in this area of research in fact challenge the dominant view in literature and provide research avenues based on the best practices in the field.

Chapter 4 presents a set of three recent case studies on greenwashing, namely Volkswagen Dieselgate, #PlasticMonster and Nestlè, Golden Agri Resources and Dow Jones Sustainability Index. The empirical analysis of these cases provides lessons for avoiding the greenwashing trap. The chapter reflects on deliberate and accidental practices that cause greenwashing accusations. It proposes a series of communication principles and guidelines, addressed to develop managerial solutions to avoid greenwashing risks and associated negative effects.

The final chapter (Chapter 5) concludes with ideas on where greenwashing is expected to move in the future. It stresses the risk of other forms of corporate deception, including greenhushing, that is a deceptive strategic silence that occurs when companies voluntarily decrease their communication on sustainability issues. As regards different forms of greenwashing, the chapter offers a clear picture of the role of communication in sustainability-oriented organisations that can help companies being involved in ethically questionable management practices. The final part of the chapter moves from a firm-level perspective of greenwashing to a systemic view, necessary to address some unresolved tensions in sustainability approaches that cause ‘deep-rooted’ greenwashing. A broader relational view of the processes and the connections between actors (the company, the industry, the consumer, society at large) can help to refocus the greenwashing phenomenon and support policy and decision-makers to identify priority areas for action.

In terms of contributions, this book is a systematic examination of greenwashing research that offers a comprehensive picture of building blocks (business ethics, CSR, corporate environmentalism, corporate communication), greenwashing typologies, different theoretical and methodological approaches used by scholars to investigate the phenomenon. By tapping into systematic literature review in management, marketing, accounting, corporate

communication and business ethics, an integrated and extended view of the greenwashing dynamics is proposed.

From a practical perspective, the book will help to bridge the theory–practice gap by providing managers with key lessons to avoid the greenwashing trap and to reduce negative strategic and reputational effects in the long run. Lastly, the reflection on future trends moves beyond firm-level perspective and mainstream views in extant research. Critical analyses of the social and environmental costs of greenwashing are not new. However, what this book would add is an integrative view among different disciplines and a holistic systemic perspective. This could help to tackle the dangers of deceptive corporate sustainability communication in a broader perspective.

The hope is that this volume can provide significant benefits to students, researchers, managers, professionals, policymakers and organisations that experience the challenges of the sustainability revolution. By developing a critical and analytical approach to the theoretical and practical dimensions of CSR communication and greenwashing, this book can offer valuable insights for curricular development, sustainable growth and ethical business decisions.

Agostino Vollero

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I started to write this book during the first months of the lockdown in Italy following the first wave of the COVID-19 pandemic. What I observed then is that many companies tried to exploit their response to the situation by proposing the same slogans and hashtags used by people that seek to reassure each other of the dramatic situation, for example, the Italian motto *andrà tutto bene* ('everything will be alright') or the hopeful Cantonese expression *jiayou* ('don't give up'). I found that some ads and other corporate messages took it even further by reimagining a different post-pandemic world, characterised by inclusiveness, solidarity and sustainability. Sadly, almost none of these companies have changed their unsustainable or irresponsible practices. This makes me consider it was the right time to systematically analyse greenwashing, as it permeates all aspects of everyday life, even without full awareness of it.

Nevertheless, this book is based on my extensive research into sustainability communication and associated degenerative phenomena since 2006 and up to the present day. I frequently discussed and worked on the topic with my extraordinary colleagues at the Sustainability Communication Centre (SCC) – POLICOM (Department of Political and Communication Sciences), University of Salerno (Italy) – an inspiring research environment that encourages knowledge exchange and collaborative research.

I am therefore particularly indebted to Prof. Alfonso Siano who taught me a lot from a scientific point of view and always helped me to develop a critical view of the most controversial issues, by reading and commenting several chapters of this book. I am much obliged to my SCC colleagues, Paolo Picicchi, Francesca Conte, Maria Palazzo, Maria Giovanna Confetto, Domenico Sardanelli and Sara Amabile, who helped me to refine my ideas on different theoretical approaches and contributed to some of the case studies hereby presented.

I have also had the privilege of testing some of the ideas included in the book and to receive constructive feedback from many generous colleagues at academic conferences and meetings, among which I would like to remember the IABS and CSR communication conferences, and the annual meetings by

Sinergie-SIMA (Italian Society of Management) and SIM (Italian Academy of Marketing).

Finally, I would like to acknowledge with gratitude, the support and love of my family, my wife Grazia and my children, Riccardo and Francesco. They keep me going, ‘walking the talk’; this book would not have been possible without them.

Agostino Vollero

UNDERSTANDING GREENWASHING

1. ETHICAL BEHAVIOUR IN ORGANISATIONS: WHAT IS THE ROLE OF ENVIRONMENTAL AWARENESS?

One of the most complex challenges organisations are facing nowadays are the ethical issues in conducting their businesses. This is not a new question, but the spread of digital media has undoubtedly accelerated the process by bringing all corporate actions under public scrutiny and media analysis. The Dieselgate scandal, the allegations of poor working and environmental conditions against multinational fashion corporations, the accusations of bribery and insider trading against financial players, the scandals related to false advertising, and even the public condemnation of unfairness and immorality against the elitist European Super League project, are continuously in the spotlight. The list of examples could go on and on. From the 1980s more and more companies have been accused of being greedy, selfish, and interested only to raise their private wealth and power (Stead, Worrell, & Stead, 1990). And things seem not be changed later, as the urgency of ethical issues in organisations remains a crucial element of managerial practice.

More generally, ethical behaviour in organisations concerns all actions regarding misconduct in businesses and what the public perceives as ‘bad’ or ‘wrong’ as opposed to ‘good’ and ‘right’ in a business setting (Sims, 1992). In other terms, ethical behaviours in organisations involve a failure of businesses to act in accordance with moral norms generally accepted in society. Both intra-organisational ethical issues as well as social/societal issues that are influenced by a company’s activities could raise public concern due to company failures.

The debate on ethical issues in organisations, however, has a long-line tradition and it is situated in different and fragmented streams of business

research: some studies can be traced back to first management contributions focusing on top executives' social responsibility (Bowen, 1953; Davis, 1960; McGuire, 1963), others are more connected to a systems view of the firm that is bearing a 'socio-humanistic responsibility' (Ericson, 1970), others instead are more linked to the conservation movement (Buchholz, 1993) and to what has been then labelled as 'green movement' (Du Pisani, 2006). And nearly from the beginning of this debate, the risk of deceptive communication in environmental claims by companies was quite clear, as exemplified by the fact that the advertising executive Jerry Mander (1972) coined the term *eco-pornography* to describe the exploitation of environmental issues exclusively for commercial purposes. The present chapter therefore will focus on the interconnection of these ethical stances as antecedents of deceptive communication about corporate environmental and corporate sustainability performance.

'Cosmetic' communication about the environmental profile of organisations is intrinsically interconnected with the increasing importance of environmental issues in the period following the Second World War, where most developed countries saw a rapid upsurge in industrial production, consumption, urbanisation and mobility. This has led to over-exploitation of fossil fuels and natural wildlife, widespread use of pesticides and DDT in agriculture and to rising concerns about the rapid depletion of natural resources (Blackstone, 1974; Carson, 1962; Dubos et al., 1970). In most Western countries, from the mid-1960s, environmental 'rights' were claimed by different social groups along with claims of nonviolence, social justice and participative democracy. Progressively, ecological disasters (such as the Santa Barbara Oil Spill in 1969) received more and more attention from mainstream media and fostered the idea of a global environmental crisis. An exemplar sign of this awareness was the first Earth Day in 1970, with over 20 million Americans joining the celebration asking for a more sustainable environment by reducing pollution caused mainly by multinational companies (Agudelo, Jóhannsdóttir, & Davídsdóttir, 2019). In the same years, the progressive environmental awareness favoured the birth of the Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) in the United States and of the first environmental non-governmental organisations (ENGOS), i.e., Greenpeace and Friends of the Earth. At global level, the first United Nations Conference on the Human Environment was held in 1972 and was a further boost to the creation of the United Nations Environment Program and of national government environmental agencies in several countries, thus leading to the affirmation of the principle of international solidarity in environmental terms based on the fact 'the local and global sides

of environmental protection are complementary' (Cullet, 1995, p. 27). The rise of this green awareness had a considerable influence on some political parties that put ecologism on top of their political agenda (Du Pisani, 2006).

Nattrass and Altomare (1999) identify the birth of the ecology movement in the 1970s as the first era of environmental awareness. This era has been characterised by the identification of the 'environmental right' (Blackstone, 1974), namely the moral and legal right of every individual to a healthy, clean, and liveable environment based on the principle that the natural environment needs protection to guarantee human survival. The right to environment pushes not only governments but also organisations to avoid harmful environmental initiatives and to foster the promotion of policies aimed at the improvement of the natural environment. Accordingly, economic growth cannot be the only factor defining the relationship between development and the natural environment, but it should be balanced by environmental rights as a fundamental human right (Cullet, 1995). The clear definition of behavioural norms aimed at harmony with the environment is also in contrast with utilitarian ethics commonly used in business settings to justify corporate actions (Jenkins, 1998).

The confirmation by scientists and climatologists of the greenhouse effect and the negative impact on the environment and climate (Haden, Oyler, & Humphreys, 2009) and other ecological disasters in the 1980s, such as the Union Carbide incident in 1984 (Trotter, Day, & Love, 1989) and the Exxon Valdez oil spill in 1989 (Patten, 1992), opened the second era of environmental awareness and put more and more pressure on companies to preserve the environment and natural resources, also beyond their legal compliance (Haden et al., 2009; Nattrass & Altomare, 1999). This has led many companies to consider more proactive environmental management strategies (Hunt & Auster, 1990) and to significantly increase the disclosure of environmental information in their annual reports (Patten, 1992).

In the 1990s, more and more companies became environmentally conscious and started to emphasise in their communications their continuous improvement in relation to environmental issues: in this third era of environmental awareness (Nattrass & Altomare, 1999) organisations in fact developed strategies to reduce their environmental harm and resource intensity in their operations through the adoption of procedures and tools aimed at improving eco-efficiency (Ehrenfeld, 2005).

Although the amount of environmental information and content in the annual reports (and, indeed, in general corporate communications) increased, most organisations did not always show effective and concrete efforts to protect the environment. Attempting to deceive the public by exaggerating

environmental initiatives or disclosing only positive accomplishments is actually associated with the rise of eco-awareness.

2. CORPORATE ENVIRONMENTALISM AND THE RISE OF GREENWASHING

To understand why more and more companies have progressively moved from a resistance to environmentalism to a proactive approach to environmental management, it will be useful to observe different eras in corporate environmentalism, defined as ‘the recognition and integration of environmental concerns into a firm’s decision-making process’ (Banerjee, 2002, p. 177).

2.1 Main Phases of Corporate Environmentalism

Hoffman (2001) in his seminal book entitled ‘From heresy to dogma: An institutional history of corporate environmentalism’ used institutional theory to explain how the chemical and oil industries have passed through four distinct eras of corporate environmentalism:

- (1) *Industrial environmentalism* (1960–1970), when companies attempted to resolve the conflicts caused by environmental problems internally. Most of them adopted internal configurations/structures like other companies (mainly due to mimetic isomorphism).
- (2) The period 1970–1982 could be labelled as *regulatory environmentalism* and has been characterised by a focus on compliance with ‘newer’ environmental laws imposed by States and supra-national authorities.
- (3) ‘*Environmentalism as social responsibility*’ era in which companies started to propose voluntary initiatives to prevent pollution and reduce waste, encouraged by industry associations that acted as *normative institutions*.
- (4) In the late 1990s, the fourth era of corporate environmentalism refers to the proactive efforts of top-level management to integrate environmental strategies in their strategic decision-making.

Some external events with global resonance (e.g. publication of Carson’s book *Silent Spring*, Union Carbide incident, Exxon Valdez oil spill, etc.) favoured the transition from one era to another. At the same time, *dominant institutions* also changed in the different periods: while governments became

the protagonists in *regulatory environmentalism*, in the subsequent eras industry associations and non-profit organisations played a key role in fostering social responsibility environmentalism, and then competitors, rating and financial organisations gained more and more power in pushing companies to adopt a proactive approach to environmental issues. Companies moved from managing internally environmental problems as bothersome issues, to various phases of regulation and self-regulation in which external authorities gradually imposed or/and recommended some revised norms and procedures, to the point that organisations re-internalised environmental issues as a strategic concern. More in general, corporate environmentalism in this century (year 2000 and beyond) has been characterised by high integration between company and environmental goals (Nattrass & Altomare, 1999) and by the need to assimilate sustainability actions at both strategic and operational levels (Haden et al., 2009).

According to Bowen (2014), there are two alternative perspectives on corporate environmentalism: the conventional and the critical.

In the *conventional perspective*, environmental resources affect a company's resources, its strategy and ultimately its performance. In this perspective, corporate environmentalism serves to match external resources with internal resources to guarantee a long-lasting competitive advantage. The conceptual background of this perspective is the Resource-Based View (RBV) and particularly its adaptation from Hart (1995), the Natural Resource-Based View (NRBV) of the firm. NRBV theorists argue that competitive advantage can only come from capabilities which promote environmentally sustainable economic activity by starting from the link between the company and its environment (Hart, 1995; Hart & Dowell, 2011). In particular, Hart (1995) identifies three main strategies: (1) *pollution prevention*, concerning the reduction of emissions before the production process rather than during and at the end of the pipe, (2) *product stewardship*, related to the reduction of the environmental impacts in the entire product lifecycle, including choice of materials and product design, (3) *sustainable development*, further detailed into clean technologies (Hart, 1997) and the base of the pyramid, that include the social dimension of sustainable development (Hart & Christensen, 2002).

The core idea of NRBV theory is that environmental constraints usually seen as limitations to a company's operations can instead be the foundation for a more solid competitive advantage (Berchicci & King, 2007). This is because the three above-mentioned strategies (pollution prevention, product stewardship, sustainable development) are fundamental to a company's continuous improvement

and facilitate the development of sustainable dynamic capabilities (Teece, Pisano, & Shuen, 1997), i.e., the abilities to develop and reconfigure internal and external competences in a rapidly changing environment. These sustainable-based dynamic capabilities enable firms to seize and shape opportunities and, above all, to maintain their competitiveness by combining and reconfiguring, when necessary, their intangible and tangible assets (Teece, 2007).

Bowen (2014) affirms that the conventional perspective has been criticised as it does not give enough attention to the real improvement of the natural environment, by focusing on visible (but often empty) indicators of corporate environmentalism (e.g. labels, certifications, schemes). It should be noted however that this conventional perspective has increased the level of awareness of environmental issues (in meetings, in business schools, in public debate) to a level never reached before and introduced a new language in contemporary business (Bowen, 2014). These changes cannot be dismissed as irrelevant as communication has a performative power (Ashcraft, Kuhn, & Cooren, 2009) and in the long run inevitably an influence on concrete practices.

The critical perspective theorists of corporate environmentalism argue instead that changes brought by corporate environmentalism in organisational forms and processes are almost irrelevant, and most corporations have simply added the term 'sustainable' to the traditional ways of production and consumption (Banerjee, 2012). The critical perspective considers the larger impact on society of corporate environmentalism, extending beyond a firm-level perspective, and emphasises the political nature of corporate environmentalism (Crane, Matten, & Moon, 2008). On these lines, the main goal of corporate environmentalism is the control of the rhetoric surrounding environmental issues (Karliner, 1997). And this applies also to proactive corporate environmentalism that tends to misrepresent the environmental discourse. For example, the language of win-win solutions, by shifting the focus from a discussion on moral responsibility to a debate on practical and technical solutions (Bowen, 2014), aims at dominating the debate more than offering concrete solutions to environmental problems. A case in point is represented by what Springett (2003) named the 'sustainable development industry', full of labels, symbols, and standards, but which fails to effectively deal with environmental problems. Other critical theorists also highlight that corporate environmentalism is another expression of corporate neo-colonialism that imposes a Western frame of responsibility, by continuing to control natural resources due to consolidated power relations (Jermier, Forbes, Benn, & Orsato, 2006).

2.2 The Rise of Greenwashing

However, while organisations, especially those operating in transnational contexts, are more and more concerned about environmental issues and include them in their decision-making process, they are growingly tempted to present an environmental responsible image even if their concrete actions are not fully respectful of the natural environment and resource use. In other terms, where some observers have seen strategic and authentic concern for the environment by companies (and label it as corporate environmentalism), others, more critic and sceptic, spot greenwashing (Mulligan, 1999; Ramus & Montiel, 2005). Motivations behind 'green' initiatives are in fact not always explicitly stated by companies, and the focus on a single environmentally friendly project could divert attention from other questionable practices (Mulligan, 1999).

A notable example is represented by the same origin of the term greenwashing, coined by New Yorker environmental activist Jay Westerveld (Pearson, 2010). In a short essay of 1986, Westerveld criticised hotels for their practice of placing in each room a 'green card' to promote reuse of towels with the payoff 'Save our Planet',¹ but doing almost anything else to show any real efforts to protect the environment (e.g. programmes to reduce energy consumption or waste). The practice of reusing towels in fact was primarily motivated by labour cost reduction in laundry services by these companies, thus making their environmental claims questionable.

In the 1990s, Kangun, Carlson, and Grove (1991) in their study on the problems associated with environmental advertising define greenwashing as environmental claims that are trivial, misleading, or deceptive to consumers. Later, Greer and Bruno (1996) dedicated a whole book to greenwashing (expanding a report of Greenpeace) and in line with other contributions of that period they tend to dismiss all corporate environmentalism as greenwashing or as a public relation spin, namely a deliberate exercise of style with no substance (Athanasidou, 1996; Tokar, 1997). Greenwashing was then assimilated to any unethical environmental practice and the focus was on the risk for society and future generations. In the last two decades, the scientific debate about greenwashing has been in constant growth and the definition of the phenomenon has gradually acquired different nuances of meaning, even if some features remain constant (see [Table 1.1](#)).

1 'Save Our Planet: Every day, millions of gallons of water are used to wash towels that have only been used once. You make the choice: A towel on the rack means, "I will use again." A towel on the floor means, "Please replace." Thank you for helping us conserve the Earth's vital resources'.

Table 1.1. Main Definitions of Greenwashing.

Source	Definition
Kangun et al. (1991)	Environmental claims that are trivial, misleading, or deceptive to consumers
Concise Oxford Dictionary (1999)	Disinformation disseminated by an organisation so as to present an environmentally responsible public image
Laufer (2003)	Disinformation from organisations [...] so as to hide deviance, deflect attributions of fault, obscure the nature of the problem [...] and, finally, seek to appear in a leadership position
Terra Choice (2007)	The act of misleading consumers regarding the environmental practices of a company or the environmental benefits of a product or service
Gillespie (2008)	Advertising or marketing that misleads the public by stressing the supposed environmental credentials of a person, company or product
Lyon and Maxwell (2011)	Selective disclosure of positive information without full disclosure of negative information so as to create an overly positive corporate image
Delmas and Burbano (2011)	The intersection of two firm behaviours: poor environmental performance and positive communication about environmental performance
Walker and Wan (2012)	A strategy that companies adopt to engage in symbolic communication of environmental issues without substantially addressing them in actions. The difference between symbolic and substantive actions.
Bowen (2014)	Greenwashing is a deliberate communication strategy by firms that, by definition, is disconnected from substantive greening [...] Greenwashing focuses attention on highly visible green initiatives or criteria, thereby deflecting attention from a more comprehensive analysis.
Lyon and Montgomery (2015)	The word greenwash is used to cover any communication that misleads people into adopting overly positive beliefs about an organisation's environmental performance, practices, or products
Seele and Gatti (2017)	Greenwashing is a co-creation of an external accusation toward an organisation with regard to presenting a misleading green message
Siano et al. (2017)	Besides these two known types of greenwashing (attention deflection and decoupling) [...] ('deceptive manipulation') greenwashing consists in deceptive conduct, in which