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# Disinformation Advertising With Greenwashing **Within For-Profit Business Writing**

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Disinformation Advertising With Greenwashing  
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## **Executive Summary**

For-profit business writing is one of the more prevalent types of writing encountered by the public every day. A lot of its intent is to shape public perception, whether it be about a movement, an organization, a company, or a product. Green marketing is an element of business writing focused on the growing consumer concern around environmental sustainability and climate activism. Through this style of messaging, companies can showcase their climate-friendly initiatives and other steps they take to ensure that their impact is as minimal as possible.

Greenwashing is a growing problem rooted in the same area of for-profit businesses, namely in the areas of advertising and marketing, and can be described as a form of disinformation that is used to intentionally warp a consumer's perception of a company or product. A notable example of this can be seen through the Diesel Gate, Volkswagen case, where Volkswagen claimed to have a greener, more sustainable, low-emission engine that converted diesel into a less harmful byproduct than was typical with other cars in the market. This was proven to be false, however, as the tested cars were engineered to put out less byproduct when being tested, only to return to normal operation during consumer use.

The manufacturing and dissemination of greenwashing is a phenomenon that is becoming more prevalent, but it is also becoming easier to spot and weed out. This and other forms of misinformation and disinformation are becoming normalized for Gen Y and Gen Z, two generations known to be digital natives. These generations, due to substantial online exposure, are becoming more adept at spotting these forms of misinformation and learning that trust in online sources should not be immediately given.

## **Professional Writing in For-Profit Business**

Professional writing plays a significant role in persuading the public that a business is a certain way or has a certain public image. The efforts of professional writing within for-profit businesses are important in shining a positive light on the business for the public's eyes, and this starts with targeting the primary audience of greenwashing: consumers.

### *Audiences and Purposes of For-Profit Business Writing*

Generally, within for-profit industries, the audience is more important than the writer. It is imperative for businesses to develop a foundation of trust and commitment between them and their audiences. These audiences will vary depending on a specific business's goals and progress, but generally, they include the following: customers and clients, investors, employees, competing businesses, editors, government agencies, and legal teams. When communicating with these audiences, the main goal is to "give [them] the information they need to make decisions, take actions, or follow procedures," (Mancuso, 1992). Because

businesses need to make a profit, aligning their ideals with that of their consumers is very important in managing their public reputation.

### *Contexts within For-Profit Business Writing*

For-profit businesses that use professional writing have a major role in the social, intellectual, and professional context. The social context that creates professional writing is the prevalent social norms or rules society follows. For-profit business writing has to take these social concerns into consideration when using writing to communicate to customers within this social context. While making sure the needs of social context is meant, professional writing in for-profit businesses have to also follow the professional context of using writing to communicate. There are correct and professional ways or guidelines that businesses follow when using business writing such as not lying when communicating to consumers. Knowing the professional context in which for-profit businesses use professional writing to communicate, these businesses can find ways to exploit these constructs to their advantage such as greenwashing. Therefore because social contexts such as society growing more concerned about environmental impacts, business writing has to shift or adjust to these societal context evolution. An example of business writing adjusting to social context is a firm “adopting Corporate Social Responsible practices” (Coelho, Marques & Santos, 2023) to stay up to date with new and changing social contexts. In the professional context of business writing, for-profit businesses will use key words such as “sustainability, impact, perception, attitudes, consumer, consumption, purchase intention, trust” (Coelho, Marques & Santos, 2023) within their writing to cater to these social trends. The professional, intellectual, and social context drive for-profit business writing to be aligned with different aspects of these three contexts.

### *For-Profit Business Writing Genres*

Genres within the industry include but are not limited to: advertisements, websites, business reports, account summaries, proposals, memos, and case studies. When analyzing the different genres across business writing, it is important to understand the difference between the genres involving internal and external communication. When communicating to external audiences like customers and competing businesses, writers have to factor in current societal standards, consumer preferences, legal constraints, and inclusivity; if a certain context is missed, then the effectiveness of the communication will likely be compromised. The same is for internal business communication with employees or investors. Writers must consider company values, financial performance, employee communication preferences, and even investors’ risk tolerances; overlooking these ideas can harm the interpersonal relationships within a company.

## **What is Greenwashing?**

Over the last 50 years, there have been increased efforts to produce environmentally friendly products, thus resulting in companies’ efforts to advertise their products as such.

Greenwashing is caused by society's growing concerns about environmental sustainability and the effect of a business's treatment of the environment. It is a form of disinformation that is used to intentionally warp a consumer's perception of the company. The term "greenwashing" was coined by environmentalist Jay Westerveld in 1986 in an essay that called out the hotel industry's exploitation of environmental advertising to save money (Orange & Cohen, 2010). Obviously, businesses have the incentive to publish advertisements and statements that favor environmental activism and sustainability; this can better their public image and increase their market share (Ramus & Montiel, 2005). These marketing strategies are considered greenwashing when "they highlight positive environmental attributes of a company or its products but lack tangible results or proof," (Bingaman et al., 2022).

## **Misinformation and Disinformation**

When discussing greenwashing and misleading information, it is important to understand the difference between misinformation and disinformation. Misinformation can occur due to miscommunication or incorrect interpretations whether it be a source whose words were misconstrued or a misinterpreted set of data. Disinformation, on the other hand, is intentional misinformation.

### *Motivations for Creating and Disseminating Misinformation and Disinformation*

According to a study by Thomas D Wilson and Elena Maceviciute (2022), "the main types of motivation for creating and facilitating misinformation were identified as "in-order-to motivations", i.e. seeking to bring about some desired state." A notable example of this strategy is used by the study's authors, in reference to their findings; they discuss the lies put out by former President Donald Trump regarding the 2020 election. He and his team intentionally spread lies about how the election was stolen in an attempt to bolster his supporters and overturn the election, putting him back in power (Wilson & Maceviciute, 2022). Though the motivations are easy to determine in this instance, the full effects were likely not accounted for.

Motivations for disseminating greenwashed messages remain similar in intent. By creating instances where the consumer believes a product or service is more eco-friendly, they feel more inclined to purchase it over other alternatives. The biggest motivator for engaging in such activities is, of course, the profit that companies seek to gain by convincing consumers that they have the best product or service. (Wilson & Maceviciute, 2022)

### *How Social Media Platforms are Combating Misinformation*

Misinformation is rooted deeply in social media and other places within the internet, as it is one of the main facilitators of most communication. (Cheng & Zifei, 2021) Not everything that is posted and shared online can be vetted properly, thus leading to an easy spread of misinformation. Different companies are engaging in different methods of combating this misinformation; for example, Google, one of the biggest search engines, has developed

artificial intelligence (AI) and algorithms to more effectively sort out misinformation. (Bourne, 2022) For example, the Global Warming Policy Foundation (GWPF) is a think tank based on climate policy that often tries to contradict the findings of known experts when discussing climate. Due to proven ties to oil companies, showing an inherent bias against climate-saving policies, and the inaccuracies of the GWPFs information, Google has intentionally prevented their site from showing up in search results. Trying to find information on climate change will show results with more-respected and vetted sources, meaning that you have to intentionally seek out the GWPF to find it. (“Climate sceptic thinktank...”, 2022)

### *How Misinformation Affects Generation Y and Generation Z*

Generations Y and Z have been faced with an abundance of information at all times, and don’t know a world without it. Alongside this, however, they also have experience with more misinformation than any other generation and have become more adept at filtering it out. Trust in social media companies is incredibly low for these groups, and they know to not immediately trust everything they see. They have, however, witnessed the effects of misinformation in real-time, especially regarding the 2020 election, which furthers their overall skepticism. (Tick et al., 2022)

Misinformation has resulted in lots of media literacy, and an ability to sort out things like propaganda, greenwashing, and lies unlike any generation before. However, these groups are not completely immune. In the study done by A. Tick and their team, they found that most participants claimed to avoid “fake news” but still admitted to making decisions based on information later deemed false. The study found that many of the participants were still highly influenced by intentionally false or deceptive information, regardless of their attempt to avoid said information. (Tick et al., 2022)

### **Causes of Greenwashing**

Just because someone does something doesn’t mean that others should. This saying is the same with greenwashing, although the United States had a harder time with this idea than other countries. Several companies within the United States put on a green front to make their products appear more environmentally friendly than they actually are. They do this because it is more likely for a buyer to want to buy a product that is green than one that isn’t. With more companies going green or appearing green, there is a higher chance of greenwashing just to keep up with the trend (Baum, 2012).

The United States can be compared to the United Kingdom to demonstrate the causes of greenwashing and the reason it is much more prevalent than it is within the United States. In a study that analyzed the sustainability content between the United States and the United Kingdom, Baum (2012) states, “Environmental movements in both countries are similar but environmental regulations are strikingly different.” This means that both countries have continuously raised concern for the environment since the “1960s and early 1970s,” but the United Kingdom is truly “greening” their society, whereas the United States is greenwashing

theirs (Baum, 2012). This has happened because the regulations, public support, education, and company commitment within the United States are insufficient (Baum, 2012).

After comparing and contrasting the United States with the United Kingdom, it was found that there are four primary reasons why greenwashing happens so frequently:

- 1) “an increased consumer demand” for green products
- 2) “increased sales of green products,”
- 3) very few laws against greenwashing
- 4) Little regulation (Baum, 2012)

Consumers don’t know how to identify greenwashing. If the government isn’t taking any action to actually improve sustainability, then greenwashing will continue to happen simply because it's easier and cheaper than actually improving their environmental impact.

Companies prefer making more money without having to put in more work, rather than actually saving the planet.

## **Identifying Greenwashing**

In order to prevent the success of greenwashing, it is important for consumers to be able to analyze the sustainability claims they encounter. By increasing advertising literacy, greenwashing efforts will be unsuccessful and companies can be held accountable.

### *Types of Greenwashing Claims*

One way to differentiate between the different types of greenwashing is with what TerraChoice calls “the seven sins of greenwashing.” TerraChoice, now a subsidiary of Underwriters Laboratories Standards, is a Canadian environmental marketing firm. In partnership with Ecologo, a third-party sustainability certification company, they developed the following subcategories of greenwashing, in order from most to least common: the hidden trade-off, lack of proof, vagueness, worshipping false labels, irrelevance, preference for the lesser of two evils, and fibbing (“The 7 Sins of Greenwashing”, 2010).

The sin of the hidden trade-off, “made by 57% of all environmental claims,” is when one small eco-friendly claim is highlighted by a company to distract from more prevalent environmental issues that are happening behind the scenes (Plec & Pettenger, 2012). Worshipping false labels happens when a company falsifies packaging or advertisements to imply a third-party certification that isn’t truly there. The preference for the lesser of two evils “occurs when an eco claim makes consumers feel "green" about a product category that is itself lacking in environmental benefits. Organic cigarettes are an example of this sin,” (“The 7 Sins of Greenwashing”, 2010). Along with the other more straightforward sins, the aforementioned identifiers can help educate consumers to effectively analyze sustainability claims they come across.



## *Label Literacy*

In order to buy environmentally friendly products, buyers need to be able to determine which claims are legitimate and not falsely advertised. Greenwashing is very prevalent in this day and age because a lot of people can't determine what is actually green. Labels on products are the main reason why it is difficult to determine what is being greenwashed. For example, claims like "biodegradable" and "eco-friendly" can also be misleading and do not necessarily constitute sustainable business practices (Kirts, 2023). The best way to determine if green advertising is disinformation is by looking for evidence to back up a company's claim. Kirts (2023) states, "responsible reporting, independent auditing, transparent sourcing and third-party certification" are all good methods to identify greenwashing. There are always loopholes in these identifiers, but they can be beneficial for the average consumer.

Brigitte Naderer & Suzanna J. Oprea's article "Increasing Advertising Literacy to Unveil Disinformation in Green Advertising" used "two different advertising literacy measures," a quiz, and an informative text to measure consumers' ability to spot greenwashing (Naderera & Oprea, 2021). Participants had difficulty with both measures, but the quiz seemed promising for the future. The fact of the matter is that without government regulations companies aren't going to stop greenwashing. Spreading more knowledge like a quiz or knowing some key factors about a product that is likely green will be really helpful to consumers and greenifying the United States.

## **Examples of Greenwashing**

### *Dieseldgate*

Greenwashing "has almost tripled since 2006" because green initiatives have continued to increase as the world goes through climate change and other struggles (Aurand et al., 2018). The Volkswagen diesel scandal, also known as "Dieseldgate," was the largest use of greenwashing in advertising that caused tons of people to be uninformed about the car they were buying. The vehicle manufacturing company used software to cheat on emissions tests, which reduced the car's emissions of greenhouse gases to the legal limit when the car was being tested. When in reality, the car's emissions were 75% higher than the legal limit (Aurand et al., 2018). Volkswagen's low-emissions claims are an example of the "sin of fibbing" discussed previously.

Volkswagon sold more than "550,000 diesel cars based on false claims that the cars were low-emission, environmentally friendly, met emissions standards and would maintain a high resale value," (Vedova, 2023). They used advertisements promoting their "clean diesel" within the "Super Bowl ads, online social media campaigns, and print advertising, often targeting "environmentally-conscious"(Vedova, 2023). Figure 1, taken from a Volkswagen television advertisement titled "Three Old Wives Talk Dirty," reflects how greenwashing was used to deceive and win over customers (Vedova, 2023).

**Figure 1**

*Volkswagen Advertisement Promoting Clean Diesel*



*Note:* Figure 1 is a screenshot from Volkswagen's "Three Old Wives Talk Dirty" TV spot

The image in Figure 1 taken from Volkswagen's television advertisement displays many identifiers of greenwashing. First, the slogan "like really clean diesel" is simple, and the use of the word "clean" pushes the idea that their cars are good for the environment. The background of the image showcases a bright blue sky, green grass, and a bright-colored house, all of which imply a healthy climate, thus connecting the idea of their car to a clean environment.

When the company's greenwashing efforts were exposed, they were charged with gender disinformation and installing illegal devices within the cars. Cars were stripped from their buyers, the company profits dropped, and investors' earnings plunged. Volkswagen had to pay about \$20 billion dollars in diesel-related costs by the end of 2017. Greenwashing is used every day, but to this extent, the costs outweighed the benefits (Aurand et al., 2018). Since the scandal, "Volkswagen sales were down 7.6% in 2016, but sales have significantly recovered since 2017" (Aurand et al., 2018). Now Volkswagen is doing fine, but they lost a lot of money after the campaign and now carry the reputation of having the largest diesel scandal the world has seen.

### *ExxonMobil*

Another major example of greenwashing can be found within the oil and gas industry. One of the world's largest international oil and gas companies, ExxonMobil, has been largely criticized for its misleading communication regarding the risks of climate change. In 2015, the *Los Angeles Times* alleged that the "company's efforts to fund climate change denial

organizations and cast doubt on the science and the harsh realities of climate change contradict studies by its own scientists from the 1970s and 1980s,” (Scanlan, 2017, p.1). Although countless studies were being conducted about the negative environmental impacts of fossil consumption and fracking, ExxonMobil opted to protect its business rather than the environment. ExxonMobil still publicly promoted fossil fuel consumption by incorporating didactic framing, which enables readers to “select some aspects of a perceived reality and make them more salient,” and can be “derived from the stance that there can be only one correct position on an issue,” (Scanlan, 2017, p.2). Specifically, ExxonMobil's ads utilized a scientist as a spokesperson in multiple video advertisements that put a friendly face to an otherwise harmful company. By exploiting the consumers’ trust in the expertise of authorities, the company is actively amplifying “a greenwashed frame that highlights the belief that climate change is not a threat and seeks to persuade consumers that oil companies will be the caretakers of our environment,” (Plec & Pettenger, 2012).

## **Negative Effects of Greenwashing**

Greenwashing within marketing has many consequences, both negative and positive, for both for-profit businesses and consumers. Digging deeper, the negative impacts of greenwashing affect not only consumers, but also the environment, stakeholders, and the company itself.

### *On Consumers*

Because consumers are the main focus of for-profit businesses, the consumers have to be taken into consideration when a business is trying to label itself as eco-friendly. For-profit businesses intending to greenwash use professional writing in their advertisements, written documents, public relations speeches, and products to convince consumers of the eco-friendly narrative. Through these strategic tactics, businesses use greenwashing “to influence consumer purchase intentions and behavior” (Ahmad, Zhang, 202). One consequence is “greenwashing inhibits consumers from making informed purchase decisions” (Wu, Zhang, Xie, 2020). When greenwashing is successful in deceiving consumers, the trust that consumers have in the products they are buying significantly decreases. The relationship between companies and their buyers is then tainted, and consumers become skeptical of any eco-friendly company they encounter.

### *On the Environment*

When businesses choose to participate in greenwashing, most of the time, the claims business push about helping the environment has no merit. This is because the entire purpose of greenwashing is to hide the true impact businesses have on the environment. Businesses might be doing something completely opposite of what they claim through greenwashing, and consumers and the public trust these claims as true when in reality they are not. One example of the adverse effects of greenwashing on the environment involved the Malaysia Palm Oil Council. They produced an advertisement that included a voiceover stating: “Malaysia Palm Oil. Its trees give life and help our planet breathe, and give home to hundreds of species of flora and fauna. Malaysia Palm Oil. A gift from nature, a gift for life,” (Dahl, 2010). Although advertised as this heavenly, healthful oil, research suggests palm oil

plantations are “linked to rainforest species extinction, habitat loss, pollution from burning to clear the land, destruction of flood buffer zones along rivers, and other adverse effects,” (Dahl, 2010). There was no evidence in the Malaysia Palm Oil Council’s advertisement that backed up their eco-friendly claims, thus leading to the exposure of the company’s true impact on the environment.

### *On the Company Itself*

The use of greenwashing doesn’t just impact the environment, but greenwashing directly impacts the companies as well. The process of greenwashing builds up a narrative that if businesses cannot maintain, their public image and perception will fall. This ultimately hurts the business because “perceived greenwashing can have damaging results for organizations, in regard to consumers’ product and environmental perceptions, and happiness and website interactions as well” (Szabo & Webster, 2021). When greenwashing gets out of hand, it not only affects consumers, but it can and will affect the business itself.

## **How to Prevent Successful Greenwashing**

In order to prevent successful greenwashing, consumers, companies, and the government need to work together to hold each other accountable. As discussed previously, learning to identify the key features and types of greenwashing will help consumers choose companies that are genuinely committed to sustainable practices. If consumers can accurately identify greenwashing, then they can work to hold companies accountable for their deception.

### *Preventing Greenwashing with Government Intervention*

From a government perspective, the most effective way to prevent greenwashing is with enforceable public policies and laws. Generally, “environmental claims made in marketing campaigns are not required by law to be verified, and thus companies can use misleading tactics to improve their public image without fear of legal reprisals” (Bingaman et al., 2022). The key to those policies being effective is the government’s ability to genuinely enforce them. To further demonstrate this idea, it is beneficial to return to the comparison of the United Kingdom and the United States’ efforts to stop greenwashing.

The United Kingdom published a Green Claims Code to “guide businesses on self-declared environmental claims” to ensure they are accurate, relevant, clear, and easy to understand (Baum, 2012). This code is used by the UK Trading Standards Officers to handle greenwashing claims. Additionally, the UK Advertising Standards Authority has a Code of Environmental Claims that strengthens the power of authorities to handle said claims. On the other hand, the US Federal Trade Commission has been criticized for its insufficient efforts in overseeing environmental marketing, and unlike the United Kingdom, the FTC’s “Green Guides” lack any authoritative backing that allows the guidelines to be enforced by law (Baum, 2012). The United Kingdom’s enforceable policies show their genuine effort to go green and prevent greenwashing claims, whereas the United States’ efforts are evidently surface-level.

## *Preventing Greenwashing from the Source*

From the company standpoint, preventing greenwashing is all about transparency, specificity and practicality. Professional writers within for-profit businesses must prioritize veracity when producing environmental claims. After a study investigating the significance of deception on a consumer's attitude towards a company, Newell et al. (2015) found that even the perception of disinformation on environmental claims "was enough to create negative feelings toward the ad, whether the ad was objectively misleading or not." Because greenwashing directly impacts the relationship and trust between a business and its consumers, it is crucial for professional writers to "proceed with caution when developing environmentally focused ad campaigns," for it is essential that any and all communication appeases the consumers (Newell et al., 2015). When a company is transparent and meticulous when declaring their sustainability practices, they are eliminating that risk of "perceptions of deception by consumers, environmental organizations, and government agencies who may be inclined to investigate the validity of suspect environmental claims," (Newell et al., 2015). Additionally, Newell et al. (2015) suggests for companies to be aware of all negative ramifications that accompany false claims, develop a practical corporate plan for sustainability, and stay updated on government regulations that may alter advertising procedures.

## **Conclusion**

Greenwashing is a growing issue in which for-profit companies publish misleading or falsified sustainability claims to alter their public image and appear more environmentally friendly. For professional writers, being aware of this occurrence and knowing when to spot it can prevent false information from getting out to the public. The effects of greenwashing and misinformation can be seen in their effects on the trust of the public, especially after one of the more notorious cases involving Volkswagen and their intentional altering of cars to bypass regulations and tests. Companies and organizations have a responsibility to ensure that the information they disseminate is truthful, making internal fail-safes a must, especially within the writing teams. The government also has a responsibility to its citizens to create legislation preventing greenwashing by enacting restrictions, tests, and other methods of monitoring the actions and messages of companies.

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