Unveiling the Illusions of Sustainability Washing

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ABSTRACT

As consumer awareness and demand for ethical and sustainable practices grow, many brands increasingly engage in "sustainability washing". This includes greenwashing—where companies falsely market environmentally friendly initiatives while lacking real action—and social washing, which involves promoting social responsibility without meaningful impact. By using symbolic actions, "green talk" and other deceptive measures, companies attempt to convey sustainability values to stakeholders. Though these strategies may yield short-term gains, they pose significant long-term risks for brands. As consumers uncover the deception, trust in the brand diminishes. The more widespread is the news and the more severe the violations, regulatory fines are imposed, and negative consumer feelings escalate. In extreme cases, criminal charges are inflicted, resulting in global scandals, with brand backlash that threaten the brand's and the company's survival. This paper provides a literature overview and a classification of sustainability washing practices and the associated risks, offering managers a tool for their decision making, and contributing to academic discourse deepening the understanding of the phenomenon and outlining future research directions.

1. INTRODUCTION

In an era of heightened consumers consciousness and demand for sustainability and increasing scrutiny from institutions of ethical and sustainable practices, brands engage more and more in "sustainability washing", practices that includes *greenwashing* – the practice of falsely promoting environmentally friendly policies or actions to mislead consumers while failing to implement genuine sustainability measures, and *social washing* (often also called "color washing") – the practice of promoting a company's social responsibility efforts to create a positive image while lacking real, meaningful actions to support social causes. Appearing to conform to green norms by engaging in symbolic actions or "green talk", companies think they are effective at signaling to external stakeholders the company's values regarding green issues (Ramus and Montiel, 2005) and can reap financial and competitive benefits. These practices might bring short-term results, but the long-term risks largely outweigh them (Nyilasy, G., Gangadharbatla, H., & Paladino, A.,2014; Parguel, B., Benoît-Moreau, F., & Larceneux, F., 2011; Horiuchi, R., Schuchard, R., Shea, L., & Townsend, S., 2009). The more a company is exposed to public awareness of their misleading actions and the more it is widespread in the market, the more severe the consequences on brand equity (the ability of a company to grow the customer lifetime value of their current and future customers). When groups of consumers find out the deception, they will lose trust in the brand; as authorities inflict fines and penalties for serious violations and media coverage increases, the severity and the magnitude of customer distrust and brand damage increases; in extreme cases, or when criminal charges are inflicted to managers, these violations create worldwide scandals, widespread brand aversion and brand hate, compromising the very survival of the company.

This is even more paradoxical, since adopting environmentally friendly practices has been found to bring cost savings, revenue increase, regulatory advantages and better risk management (Ambec and Lanoie, 2008; Hart, S. L., & Ahuja, G., 1996), in addition to a better brand and company reputation, defined as the collective assessment of an organization's ability to create value based on their actions. Sustainable practices significantly improve stakeholder's (consumers, competitors, activist groups) trust and facilitate investment decisions on the company (Bitektine, 2011).

Regardless of the risks, the increased scrutiny by consumers, media and authorities and the long-term advantages of truly sustainable practices, more and more companies engage in sustainability washing, undermining the global efforts to implement sustainability at large scale and eroding customer trust towards sustainable actions. Among the factors that "encourage" companies to implement them are the lack of a clear understanding by managers of which practices represent sustainability washing and a lack of awareness of the associated risks.

The research questions of this paper are:

1) **Is sustainability washing a growing concern?**
   This question aims at underlining the size and growth of the issue in today's markets.
2) **Which are the risks and consequences on brand equity of sustainability washing?**
   This question aims at providing a clear understanding to managers of the often underestimated of superficially known consequences on brands of sustainability washing.
3) **Which reference standards can be used to identify sustainability washing practices, and if none exist, how can a literature review help fill this gap?**

This question aims at verifying how existing standards for sustainability help detect, by contrast, misleading practices, and if these are not fully helpful, how a literature review can address the issue.

4) **What is a possible comprehensive classification of sustainability washing practices?**
This question aims at generating a comprehensive list of sustainability washing practices that expose companies to risks, to contribute to a better understanding of the phenomenon.

2. METHODOLOGY

2.1 Sources used

To answer the research question, this manuscript leverages extensive literature review. In conducting this research, a comprehensive examination of relevant academic, managerial, institutional and media publications was used. Key databases for academic sources include Google Scholar, JSTOR, Scopus, Web of Science, ProQuest, Business Source Premier, Emerald Insights, SAGE journals, Marketing Science Institute. Key sources for managerial sources include Harvard Business Review, MIT Sloan Management Review; McKinsey and Company Insights; Gartner; The Conference Board. Institutional sources include publications from the European Commission and the US Federal Trade Commission, the Italian Authority for Competition and Market, the US Securities and Exchange Commission, the Environmental Protection Agency, the Global Reporting initiative and the International Organization for Standardization. Media publications include The Guardian, Bloomberg, The New York Times, Financial Times, Reuters, Forbes, The Economist, Business Insider, Fast Company, The Atlantic.

2.2 Keywords used

Keywords used for the research include: Sustainability Washing, Greenwashing, Environmental Deception, Sustainability Claims, Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR), Green Marketing, Greenwashing, Social Washing, Regulations, False Sustainability Claims, Sustainability Reporting, Eco-Friendly Claims, Sustainable Business Practices, Misleading Environmental Claims, Environmental Marketing Fraud, Sustainability Disclosures, Corporate Greenwashing, Sustainability Compliance, Environmental Transparency, Ethical Branding, Green Certification Fraud, Sustainability Standards, Regulatory Guidelines on Greenwashing, Impact of Greenwashing, Impact of Social Washing, Sustainability Performance Metrics, Consumer Perception of Greenwashing, Environmental Misrepresentation; Brand Impact of Greenwashing, Financial Consequences of Sustainability Washing, Economic Impact of Greenwashing, Fines and Penalties for Greenwashing, Legal Repercussions of Sustainability Washing, Criminal Charges for Greenwashing, Regulatory Penalties for Misleading Sustainability Claims, Corporate Liability for Greenwashing, Legal Actions Against Sustainability Washing, Brand Reputation and Greenwashing, Financial Penalties for Environmental Deception, Economic Risks of False Sustainability Claims, Legal Consequences of Environmental Misrepresentation, Impact on Shareholder Value from Greenwashing, Compliance Costs for Sustainability Reporting, Sustainability Washing and Investor Relations, Legal Fines for Misleading Eco-Claims, Reputational Damage from Greenwashing/Social washing, Criminal Liability in Sustainability Practices, Regulatory Compliance and Greenwashing

2.3 Inclusion and exclusion criteria

Inclusion Criteria:
Relevance to Topic: Sources must directly address sustainability washing, greenwashing, or related concepts such as false environmental claims or misleading sustainability practices, the impact, consequences, or regulatory aspects of sustainability washing.

Type of Publication: *Academic Sources* must be peer-reviewed journal articles, academic books, and reputable conference proceedings; *Managerial Sources* must include insights and reports from recognized business and management publications or consulting firms. *Institutional Sources* must include official publications, guidelines, and reports from regulatory bodies and international organizations. *Media Publications* include articles from reputable news outlets and business media. *Language*: Sources should be in English or translated into English if necessary to ensure accessibility and comprehensibility. *Date of publication*: To ensure both historical perspective and relevance and timeliness of the information, a few articles published starting in 1997 are included, while the vast majority were published in the last 10 years. *Geographic Scope*: Include sources that cover global perspectives as well as specific regional or national contexts if they provide relevant insights into the practices and regulations of sustainability washing. *Credibility*: Sources should be from reputable and authoritative organizations or publications known for their expertise and reliability in the field of sustainability and corporate ethics.

Exclusion Criteria:
Irrelevance: Generic articles or sources that focus on unrelated topics or offer only superficial coverage of sustainability issues. Source Type: exclude sources that lack credibility or are not authoritative, such as personal blogs, opinion pieces

without substantial evidence, or informal publications. Language: sources that are not available in English and cannot be reliably translated are excluded, as this might affect the accuracy and reliability of the information. Geographic Scope: sources that focus exclusively on regions or contexts irrelevant to our primary research focus are excluded, unless they provide valuable comparative insights. Quality of Information: sources with biased, outdated, or unsupported claims, especially if they lack peer-reviewed validation or official endorsement, are excluded.

2.4 Organization of findings

The findings are organized and synthesized according to the research questions:
1) *Relevance of the phenomenon of sustainability washing in today's markets*: findings are organized based on the prevalence and relevance of sustainability washing data in today's markets;
2) *Risks of sustainability washing*: findings are organized by severity on brand equity (the reputational risks, as magnified by financial and legal (civil and criminal) risks.
3) *Framework of reference*: findings are organized around the most authoritative frameworks to assess genuine sustainability
4) *Classification of sustainability washing practices*: based on the literature analyzed, the synthesis will provide the most relevant and cited practices.

3. LITERATURE REVIEW

3.1 Sustainability washing: a growing concern?

Multiple sources converge towards evidence of a widespread use of sustainability washing practices and a significant surge of incidents in recent years, along with an increased level of scrutiny by customers, media and authorities.

Esrock and Leichty (1998) found that companies use their website primarily for self-presentation and image building. They highlight their philanthropic activities, community involvement, and other socially responsible actions to build a positive image. Hence, web claims are a primary source of information used by Companies for reputation management. Web communications have been the object of a recent investigation by the European Commission. The EU carries out an analysis of websites ("sweep") to identify breaches of EU consumer laws in online markets. In 2021, the sweep focused on analyzing online claims on sustainability from various business sectors. EU researchers investigated 344 seemingly dubious claims in more detail and found that in 42% of cases the claims were exaggerated, false or deceptive and could potentially qualify as unfair commercial practices under EU rules. In more than half of the cases, companies did not provide sufficient information for consumers to judge the claim's accuracy; in 37% of cases, the claim included vague and general statements such as "conscious", "eco- friendly", "sustainable" which aimed to convey the unsubstantiated impression that a product had no negative impact on the environment. Moreover, in 59% of cases, companies had not provided easily accessible evidence to support a claim. A more recent report by the EU commission (2024), reported that vague and general statements rose from 37% to 53%; in addition, 40% of claims had no supporting evidence; 50% of green label used offered weak of non-existent verification; 230 sustainability labels and 100 green energy labels exist in the EU only, with vastly different levels of transparency.

According to ESG data and research firm RepRisk, companies making misleading environmental claims made up of 25% of climate-linked risk incidents from September 2022 to September 2023, up from 20% the same period the year prior (+25%). A US Federal Trade Commission report (2022) confirms the rise in greenwashing practices and discusses the challenges in regulating it due to the presence of guidelines that use general terms, focused on market manipulation through false information. Looking at managerial articles, research from SESAMm, a global company serving worldwide corporations by screening web data with AI, reports that between 2016 and 2023, sustainability washing mentions on the web increased drastically, from approx. 18.000 to approx. 75.000, with a staggering 3.3x from 2021 onwards. The mentions cover different topics, from false advertising and misleading practices to lawsuits. The research also reports a growing number of references regarding declining trust of the public in corporate pledges, such as those related to 'net-zero' climate goals. This increase in the reported number of mentions can be attributed to two reasons: on the one hand, the actual increase in sustainability washing practices and on the other hand, the growing scrutiny from stakeholders (i.e., investors and eco-conscious consumer base).

Up until 2020, the distribution of web mentions leaned toward one-third greenwashing and two-thirds social washing. However, post-2021, this pattern has shifted, with a rise in the frequency of greenwashing mentions, surpassing those of social washing and signaling an evolution in the focus of sustainability washing concerns. Additionally, about one third of companies practicing greenwashing was also involved in social washing. A "RepRisk" report of 2023 by Trade Finance Global, a firm specialized in Environmental, Social, and Governance (ESG) metrics, reports that the total number of alleged cases of misleading communication on ESG-related topics hit a 70% increase in banks and financial services compared to the previous 12 months. This rise has occurred in all regions, but it has been especially high for companies located in the EU, which accounted for over 70% of alleged cases. Oil and gas are at the top of the list in number of greenwashing incidents, with the banking and financial services sectors as second. Moreover, from September 2022 to September 2023, one in every four climate-related ESG risk incidents globally was tied to greenwashing, up from one to five in the previous year (+25%). In an ESMA report of 2023, the monthly number of greenwashing controversies regarding STOXX Europe 600 firms showed a trend of 4X (from 10 to 40/month). A McKinsey & Company report of 2022 confirms the growth in greenwashing incidents in recent times, while Davis and Parker (2002) address the recent surge in greenwashing practices and incidents among companies and the short-term view that leads managers to adopt them.

Academic literature constantly confirms a rise in sustainability washing practices. As far as greenwashing goes, Walker and Smith (2019) discuss the increasing prevalence of these misleading practices and provides case studies illustrating how greenwashing has become more widespread. Ghosh and Martin offer a global perspective on the rise of greenwashing, presenting empirical evidence of its increase across various industries. Johnson and Davis (2020) indicate a growth in greenwashing incidents over time. Ghosh and Thomas (2020) offer a global perspective on the rise of greenwashing, presenting empirical evidence of its increase across various industries. Dean, Abolhasani, Liu, & Golrokhi (2020) outlines how greenwashing has become more prevalent as companies respond to increased consumer demand for sustainability. It highlights the rise of greenwashing among several industries: consumer goods, luxury energy and utilities, technology, automotive, hospitality and tourism; they also emphasize how companies use superficial environmental claims in their marketing. This includes vague terms like "100% organic" or "eco-friendly" without substantiating evidence. Seele & Gatti (2021) identify a growing trend in companies using selective disclosure of information to appear more environmentally responsible. They note that, over the past decade, greenwashing accusations have surged, fueled by misleading corporate communication and the selective presentation of sustainability efforts. The study points out that media, NGOs, and stakeholders play a crucial role in identifying and escalating these cases, adding to the growing recognition of greenwashing practices.

News outlets have extensively addressed the issue of increasing greenwashing practices. As an example, an article by Harvey on The Guardian focused on the surge in greenwashing and how companies are increasingly using misleading environmental claims to attract consumers and discusses the broader negative implications on consumer trust even in brands that adopt true sustainable practice and overall disillusion on environmental advocacy.

3.2 Risks and consequences of sustainability washing on brand equity

From a reputational standpoint, there are no doubts that sustainability washing cause damage to brand reputation (Santos et al, 2024; Li et al, 2024). The increased level of awareness and scrutiny of incidents of sustainability washing by consumers, markets and Authorities have led to an increase in consumer outrage and a heightened visibility for incidents and number of allegations. A McKinsey report indicates that customers have reached the point of zero-tolerance for sustainability washing practices, and incidents cause indignation in consumers and even hate towards the brand (Santos, Coelho and Marques, 2024).

Incidents damage brand reputation incrementally as the public awareness and the severity of the violation increase. We will analyze the damage to brand equity from a limited spread of the news to a group of customers finding out deceiving practices to further damage to the brand from decline in stock price and limited access to investment, which undermines future development of the brand, to civil consequences that bring increased media exposure and uncover more serious malpractices of brands; eventually, cases of criminal consequences where the very survival of the brand is at stake. The abovementioned ambiguity of regulations has also, as a side effect, unintended actions, due to lack of awareness that certain claims or practices violate specific norms. However unintended, these actions nonetheless determine the same consequences as the intended ones and is a sign of poor managerial attentiveness. Ultimately, this unclear scenario also leads to multiplying disputes and sometimes unsubstantiated accusations. This section addresses the risks and consequences that companies face when practicing sustainability washing.

3.2.1 Consequences on brand equity from exposure to a limited groups of customers

There is little doubt that sustainability washing practices create a serious damage to the brand equity (Ottman and Shrubsole, 2011). Consequences happen both in the short- and in the long-term. When a group of customers find out they have been misled, they lose confidence in the brand, generate negative word-of-mouth, amplify their experience on social media, even boycott it and invite others to follow. In the short term, the brand sees revenue and market share loss and suffer a significant competitive disadvantage. This alone results in lost sales and revenue and difficulty in attracting new customers. As an example, in 2023, Disney's multi-racial remake of "The Little Mermaid" was accused by a prominent British diversity activist that the film, set in the 18th century, the highest point of African slavery, made no single direct reference to slavery, a total erasure and rewriting of one of the most painful and important parts of African diasporic history (a case of "whitewashing"). The movie's first full trailer was massively unpopular, garnering more than 1 million "dislikes" on YouTube less than a week after its unveiling.

Brands need to invest in recovery and public relations efforts to repair their reputation, communicating transparently with consumers, and implementing changes to regain trust; if suppliers or partners associated with the brand are implicated in these practices, it can lead to disruptions in the supply chain, resulting in increased costs, delays in production, and further damage to the brand's reputation. As the issue gains broader visibility, a longer-term damage to brand reputation can occur: a brand's reputation can suffer damage beyond the market where the incident took place if exposure by journalists and social media platforms spread rapidly, tarnishing the brand's image more broadly. Rebuilding trust and repairing a damaged reputation can be a lengthy and costly process. Some brands may struggle to regain credibility even after years of taking corrective actions.

3.2.2 Consequences on brand equity from financial market reactions

There is a direct link between financial consequences and repercussions on customers, involving a cycle of diminishing trust and reduced financial performance. The immediate reaction in the financial markets to sustainability washing is often a drop in the company's stock price. Investors react negatively to revelations of deceptive practices, perceiving them as indicative of broader management issues or potential regulatory liabilities. As the company’s reputation suffers, it may face increased volatility in its stock price, making it a less attractive investment and lead to a sell-off by existing investors and a reluctance from potential investors to buy in, further driving down the stock price. The loss of market capitalization can affect the company's ability to raise capital through equity markets, restricting its financial flexibility. Additionally, investors are increasingly prioritizing environmental, social, and governance (ESG) criteria when making investment decisions. As Feldman et al. (1997) and Konar et al. (2001) highlight, companies with poor environmental management practices have lower credit ratings and are often perceived as higher-risk investments. This can lead to higher borrowing costs or difficulties in securing funding.

This financial strain and the reduced profitability directly impact how customers perceive the brand: fragile, badly managed, unworthy of support. This further aspect exacerbates the loss of trust and leads to further decreased customer loyalty and reduced sales, magnifying the financial challenges the company faces.

3.2.3 Consequences on brand equity of civil and administrative penalties

Cases of sustainability washing practices that have a discernible impact on fair competition are subject to civil and administrative sanctions for breaching laws and regulations. The enforcement of these norms leads to even more visibility and sends a message about the severity of the violation by the brand. Among the most notable cases there is Williams Sonoma, required to pay a civil penalty of over 3 million USD for violations related to deceptive claims about products being made in the USA.

When brands are exposed and fined for sustainability washing practices, the public exposure often leads to a significant erosion of customer trust and a profound sense of disappointment or even "humiliation" among consumers who feel deceived by false sustainability claims. The consequences on customer perception following such revelations can be multifaceted: companies that market themselves as ethical or environmentally responsible cultivate customer loyalty based on these values. When those claims are proven false, customers may feel personally misled, interpreting the exposure as an insult to their intelligence and values. Customers who had trusted and invested in the brand, both financially and emotionally, feel a sense of embarrassment for having supported a company that engaged in unethical behavior. The exposure of a company’s sustainability washing in media often serves as a public spectacle, further intensifying the perception of brand failure. The sense of humiliation arises because customers may have advocated for or recommended the brand based on its false claims. When the brand is publicly humiliated, these customers feel as though their personal credibility is also diminished, leading to a strong emotional backlash. This leads to feelings of betrayal, moral outrage (Romani, Grappi and Bagozzi, 2013) and brand hate (Zarantonello, Romani, Grappi, Bagozzi, 2016; Hegner, Fetscherin, and van Delzen, 2017), determining a significant long-term loss of customers.

3.2.4 Consequences on brand equity of criminal charges

Across many countries, the most serious, deliberate and intentionally deceptive cases of sustainability washing constitute a criminal offense, leading to possible imprisonment of executives. This scenario can put a company at risk of survival. Perhaps the most notable example was the Dieselgate scandal. Volkswagen pleaded guilty to violations of the Clean Air Act, multiple counts of fraud, even obstruction of justice. The company admitted to rigging software in its diesel engines to cheat emissions tests and knowingly deceiving regulators and consumers. The total disbursement of Volkswagen was approximately 36 billion USD for US and EU fines, consumer and investor compensations. It also lost 5.3% sales globally. A Volkswagen executive responsible for environmental and engineering compliance in the U.S. was sentenced to 7 years in prison and fined $400,000 in 2017 for his role in covering up the emissions fraud. The company's CEO remained in Germany and was not extradited to the US; he resigned, paid over 10 million USD to the company, and Volkswagen's stock price plummeted. A few examples of maximum years of imprisonment for deliberate and intentional deception of customers across Countries are US: of up to 20 years; France: up to 3 years; Italy: up to 3 years; Japan up to 5 years; Canada up to 14 years.

In such cases, it's not just a brand at stake of survival: it's also the very existence of the company. Additionally, the increasing number of severe violations generate a general distrust even towards the businesses who implement genuine sustainability practices and more generally, towards sustainability initiatives tout court.

3.3 The search for reference standards

In the search for reference standards to identify sustainability washing practices, primary attention goes to the most authoritative sources defining *genuine* sustainable practices so that, by contrast, the misleading practices can be identified. The main official standards are the United Nation's *17 Sustainable Development Goals (SDG),* the *Environmental, Social and Governance (ESG)* principles and rules and the US Federal Trade Commission's "Green book". While the first two reports cover both environmental and social best practices, the FTC is relevant because, although it only focuses on environmental standards, it provides clear guidance on what companies should **not** do, which is a very relevant source in this manuscript.

The 17 SDGs identify specific actions that Countries and companies should adopt by 2030 to create a better planet for future generations. They cover both *environmental* and *social* sustainability. The *environmental* goals are, by alphabetical order: *Affordable and Clean Energy*: ensure access to affordable, reliable, sustainable, and modern energy for all; *Clean Water and Sanitation*: ensure availability and sustainable management of water and sanitation for all; *Climate action*: Take urgent action to combat climate change and its impacts; *Industry, innovation and infrastructure*: build resilient infrastructure, promote inclusive and sustainable industrialization, and foster innovation; *Life below water*: Conserve and sustainably use the oceans, seas, and marine resources; *Life on land*: protect, restore, and promote sustainable use of terrestrial ecosystems, forests, and halt biodiversity loss; *Responsible Consumption and Production*: Ensure sustainable consumption and production patterns; *Sustainable cities and communities*: make cities inclusive, safe, resilient, and sustainable. The *social* goals are, by alphabetical order: *Decent work and economic growth*: promote sustained, inclusive, and sustainable economic growth, full and productive employment, and decent work for all; *Gender equality*: achieve gender equality and empower all women and girls; *Good health and well-being*: ensure healthy lives and promote well-being for all at all ages, *No poverty*: end poverty in all its forms everywhere; *Partnerships for the goal*: strengthen global partnerships for sustainable development; *Peace, justice and strong institutions:* Promote peaceful, inclusive societies, access to justice for all, and build accountable institutions; *Quality education*: Ensure inclusive and equitable quality education and promote lifelong learning opportunities; *Reduced inequalities*: reduce inequality within and among countries; *Zero hunger*: achieve food security, improved nutrition, and promote sustainable agriculture. ESG provides a set of criteria developed over time with contributions by the UN, the International Finance Corporation (IFC), rating agencies, index providers, academics and industry reports. It is used to assess a company's operations and its impact on the *environment, society, and governance* structures. *Environmental* criteria consider how a company performs as a steward of nature; *Social* criteria examine how it manages relationships with employees, suppliers, customers, and the communities where it operates; *Governance* deals with a company's leadership, executive pay, audits, internal controls, and shareholder rights. *ESG reports* are published by companies, while independent agencies provide ESG ratings for these reports. They are now integral to investment and corporate strategies worldwide, as these criteria help to better determine the future financial performance of companies (return and risk). Investors increasingly incorporate ESG factors into their decision-making process, seeking companies that are not only profitable but also responsible and sustainable. While ESG itself is not a law, numerous regulations and worldwide incorporate ESG principles. For example, the EU has implemented the Sustainable Finance Disclosure Regulation (SFDR), which mandates transparency on how companies address sustainability risks.

ESG reports are, however, a double-edged sword. While honest ESG reports can enhance reputation and build trust, it also presents opportunities to present unclear or unsubstantiated actions. Some companies resort to this practice to seemingly adhere to ESG principles to improve their image, without implementing meaningful changes, leading to many forms of misrepresentation. The increasing regulatory scrutiny and demand for transparency make it essential for companies to genuinely commit to ESG principles rather than merely using them as marketing tools. The Federal Trade Commission "Green Book" is an interesting reference point. While not mentioning social washing, it makes specific recommendations on how to adhere to environmentally sustainability standards: *Avoid general claims*: businesses should avoid using broad or unqualified claims like "eco-friendly" or "green" unless they can substantiate them with clear and specific environmental benefits; *Substantiate claims with clear evidence*: All environmental claims must be supported by reliable scientific evidence, and companies must have proof for each specific claim being made; *Qualify specific benefits*: Companies should qualify claims to avoid misleading consumers, specifying the exact environmental attribute being promoted (e.g., "made from 50% recycled content"); *Avoid deception*: Any qualification must be clear and understandable to consumers. The FTC warns against fine print that consumers may not notice or understand; *Recyclable and compostable claims*: If a product is labeled as recyclable or compostable, the facilities needed to process these products must be available to a substantial majority of consumers in the market where the product is sold;

Certifications and seals: Using third-party certifications or seals can imply a false endorsement unless the company clarifies whether it is an independent third-party verification and the nature of the standards met. Other institutional publications indicate recommendations on sustainable practices: The UN Global Compact emphasizes corporate responsibility through its principles on human rights, labor, and anti-corruption. The publication on "Guidance on Responsible Business" touches on the risks of social washing, particularly around misleading claims about social equity and fair labor practices. The European Union (EU) Sustainable Finance Disclosure Regulation (SFDR) emphasizes transparency in sustainability reporting, particularly around ESG (Environmental, Social, and Governance) criteria. It highlights the importance of clear social responsibility claims, implicitly addressing inaccurate or deceptive claims on social practices like labor rights and fair wages. The International Labor Organization's reports on Decent Work and Fair Globalization emphasize the integrity of labor practices in corporate reporting. These discussions implicitly cover social washing, particularly when companies overstate their adherence to fair labor standards.

These official standards, however, while touching on specific points, mainly provide recommendations on the "right way" to ensure sustainability (except for the "Green Book" which specifies a few "wrong ways"). Nevertheless, many publications report that among the reasons why companies implement sustainability washing, there is a lack of clear guidelines on what exactly these practices are. Among institutional reports, we find the EU report on *"Sustainable Finance and Transparency Regulation (SFDR)"* that acknowledges that ambiguity in regulations has led to inconsistent sustainability claims. The OECD Report: *"Due Diligence in Sustainability Reporting"* (2020) discusses how the absence of clear, unified global standards in sustainability reporting allows companies to selectively disclose favorable information, leading to sustainability washing. It recommends better-defined definitions to close these gaps. Among academic literature, Benson and Craig argue that the lack of clear regulatory standards and inconsistent definitions of sustainability claims across different jurisdictions lead companies to engage in sustainability washing. Companies exploit this ambiguity by making vague or unsubstantiated claims that are difficult to verify. Horiuchi, Schuchard, Shea and Townsend, in an article by the significant title: *"The Ambiguity of Environmental Claims: How Regulations Can Encourage Greenwashing"* of 2018 highlight that unclear or weak regulations around sustainability standards provide loopholes that companies use to embellish their environmental achievements. It also notes that clearer guidance from regulators is crucial to reduce deceptive practices. Managerial and news outlet literature takes the same stance. The McKinsey & company report *"Sustainability Rules: The Ambiguities Businesses Must Contend With"* discusses how the fragmented landscape of sustainability regulations forces companies to rely on self-defined sustainability claims, contributing to the rise in greenwashing. It emphasizes the need for clearer, universally applicable guidelines to avoid misleading practices. In 2021, the Financial Times published the article *"Lack of Clear Guidelines Fuels Greenwashing in Corporate World",* reporting on how the absence of well-defined sustainability practices (and malpractices) contributes to greenwashing, as companies struggle to adhere to vague or inconsistent standards. This allows them to make ambiguous claims that are hard for regulators or consumers to challenge. The Guardian published an article in 2020 called *"Why Greenwashing Persists: Regulatory Gaps to Blame?"* that highlights that regulatory uncertainty and fragmented standards across different industries and regions allow companies to make unsubstantiated environmental claims. It calls for better-defined activities that constitute greenwashing to prevent it.

3.4 Literature review of sustainability washing practices

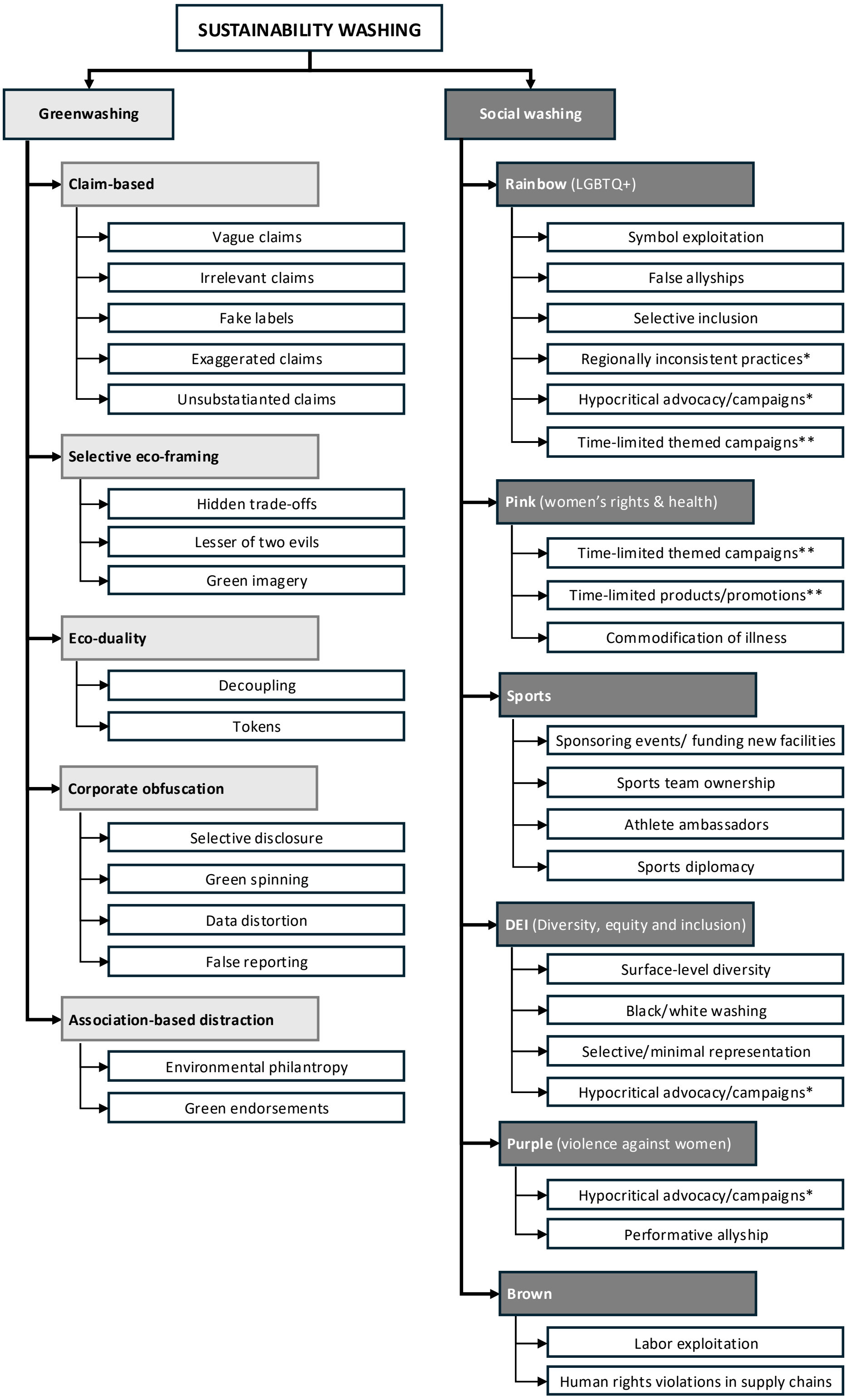
In the face of inadequate institutional guidance, we have conducted a comprehensive literature review of definitions of sustainability washing. A comprehensive list of authors and topics cited is included in Table 1. An overview includes the following publications. Delmas and Burbano (2011) discuss how companies manipulate information to present a more environmentally friendly image than their actual practices warrant. They explore the concept of greenwashing, where firms use misleading claims to appear more sustainable. Lyon and Montgomery (2015) provide insights into how companies manipulate environmental claims to mislead stakeholders and create a false image of sustainability. Hsu and Cheng (2012) examine how firms may exaggerate the impact of minor sustainable actions to distract from more significant negative environmental impacts. Banerjee (2008) discusses how companies often emphasize small, visible sustainable activities while neglecting more significant issues, leading to a misleading portrayal of their overall sustainability efforts. Mohr et al. (2001) explore how companies use endorsements and associations with reputable entities to enhance their image and credibility. Wagner and Lutz (2009**)**: examine how companies leverage endorsements and partnerships with recognized sustainability entities to improve their perceived image. Smith and Thompson (2020) discuss social washing as the use of initiatives as a facade to gain social capital without meaningful changes in internal practices. Jones and Ricketts (2018) illustrate how CSR is sometimes used as a "window dressing" for businesses, creating a false impression of social responsibility, e.g., opportunistic support to minorities and women while continuing practices that harm these communities. It frames social washing as a rising issue in corporate ethics. García-Torres and Rey-Garcia (2021) address the issue of social washing in global supply chains, where companies use social claims (e.g., fair labor practices) to mask unethical supply chain behaviors like underpaid labor or poor working conditions. Nguyen and Sloan (2019) compare greenwashing and social washing, showing how stakeholder pressure, such as consumer and investor demands, can influence companies to engage in deceptive social responsibility claims such as superficial or minimal/deceptive/time-limited support to gender, ethnic or DEI groups. Patel and Jackson (2017) focus on social washing, addressing practices like hypocritical advocacy (claims unsubstantiated by actions) and regional inconsistencies in practices and discuss how corporate PR strategies, particularly those related to social responsibility, can backfire when companies overstate their social impact. Based on the above literature review and insights from institutional frameworks, we propose a classification of sustainability washing practices that combine relevance and frequency of reported practices reported in Table 1.

Table 1: Sustainability washing practices emerging from literature review

Author	**Category addressed**	**Sustainability washing theme**
Baker (2023)	Social washing	“Performative” exploitation of LGBTQ+ symbols
Bitektine (2011)	Greenwashing Social washing	Highlighting green aspects and hide unsustainable ones Superficial DEI claims Historical distortion of events
Canup (2023)	Social washing	“Performative” sponsorship
Clancy (2001)	Social washing	Labor exploitation Athletes as ambassadors
Delmas and Burbano	Greenwashing	Manipulating/selectively disclosing information
Esrock and Leichty (1998)	Greenwashing Social washing	Highlighting differences vs less sustainable competitors Superficial advocacy for social issues
European Securities and Markets Authority (2023)	Greenwashing	Selective disclosure of information
Euronews Green (2024)	Social washing	Labor exploitation
European Commission (2021)	Greenwashing	Unsubstantiated claims Historical distortion of events Misleading claims
Hsu and Cheng (2012)	Greenwashing	Exaggerated claims Little gestures given high emphasis Highlighting green aspects and hide unsustainable ones
Ibetson and Rye (2023)	Social washing	Blackwashing
Jones and Ricketts (2018)	Social washing	Opportunistic support to minorities and women
Federal Trade Commission (2012)	Greenwashing	Vague claims Unsubstantiated claims Fake labels False information/reporting Green imagery to cover for unsustainable businesses Highlighting green aspects and hide unsustainable ones Little gestures given high emphasis Hidden trade-offs Selective disclosure of information
Feldman at al. (1997)	Greenwashing	Unsubstantiated claims Data distortion Green endorsement
García-Torres and Rey-Garcia (2021)	Social washing	Claims to mask unethical supply chain behaviors like underpaid labor or social poor working conditions
Gentile (2023)	Social washing	Whitewashing
Gordon and Dunlap (2021)	Social washing	Regional variations in LGBTQ+ support Hypocritical advocacy Time-limited themed campaigns
Kim and Choi (2010)	Greenwashing Social washing	Selective disclosure “Green spinning” to PR Exploitation of symbolism Commercialization of social issues Hypocritical campaigns
Konar and Cohen (2001)	Social washing	Diplomatic engagement through sport
Kottasova (2015)	Greenwashing	False information
Lyon and Montgomery (2015)	Greenwashing	Manipulated claims
Mohr et al. (2001)	Social washing	Opportunistic endorsements and associations
Nguyen and Sloan (2019)	Social claims	Deceptive claims such as superficial or minimal/deceptive/time-limited support to gender, ethnic or DEI groups
Ottman and Shrubsole (2011)	Greenwashing	Green imagery Highlighting green aspects and hide unsustainable ones

		Little gestures given high emphasis "Green spinning" to PR
Ottman, Stafford and Hartman (2011)	Greenwashing Social washing	Contradictory/elusive practices, e.g., dualism, selective disclosure of information, exaggerated claims Hypocritical advocacy
Patel and Jackson (2017)	Social washing	Hypocritical advocacy and regional inconsistencies in practices
Ramus and Montiel (2005)	Social washing Greenwashing	Time-limited campaigns Athlete ambassadors Hidden trade-offs Little gestures given high emphasis
Ryder (2023)	Social washing	Whitewashing
Said et al. (2024)	Green/social washing	"Performative" actions
Santos et al. (2024)	Green/social washing Greenwashing Social washing	Environmental philanthropy to divert attention from unethical working conditions Contradictory practices across categories, e.g., hypocritical advocacy, difference vs competitors Selective disclosure/hiding unsustainable aspects Selective inclusion of minorities /DEI False allyship Time-limited promotions Sports teams ownership Labor exploitation Human rights violations
Smith and Thompson	Social washing	Hypocritical campaigns Surface-level initiatives
Spotti (2019)	Greenwashing	Green imagery
Terrachoice (2007)	Greenwashing	Vague claims Highlighting differences vs less sustainable competitors False evidence and claims
Terrachoice (2010)	Greenwashing	Fake labels
Wagner and Lutz	Social washing	Opportunistic endorsements and partnerships Green endorsements
Walker and Wang (2012)	Social washing Greenwashing	Athlete ambassadors Sponsorships and funding for positive associations Vague claims Highlighting green aspects and hide unsustainable ones

Table 1 – Description of sustainability washing practices



* ***Regionally inconsistent practices and Hypocritical advocacy/campaigns*** *common in Rainbow, DEI and Purple washing*
** ***Time-limited campaigns/products/promotions*** *common in Rainbow, Pink and DEI washing*

Below is a brief description of each category.

GREENWASHING

Claim-based
- *Vague claims*: Using ambiguous terms like “eco-friendly”, “green” or “natural” without specific, verifiable evidence,
- *Irrelevant claims*: Emphasizing environmental features that are already legally mandated
- *Fake labels*: Using self-created or fake third-party eco-certifications to give the impression of independent validation
- *Exaggerated claims*: Claims about environmental benefits that are overmagnified or not supported by evidence
- *Unsubstantiated claims*: Making claims without providing accessible, accurate information

Selective eco-framing:
- *Hidden trade-offs*: Emphasizing a small green feature while overlooking major environmental harms
- *Lesser of two evils*: Positioning a product as greener than other products in its category
- *Green imagery:* Using images of nature to suggest environmental benefits that the product does not have

Eco-duality:
- *Decoupling:* Practicing eco-friendly actions in one area while hiding harmful practices elsewhere
- *Tokens:* Implementing small eco-initiatives with minimal impact to deflect criticism

Corporate obfuscation:
- *Selective disclosure:* Only disclosing positive environmental information while omitting negative data
- *Green spinning:* Manipulating information to present a positive environmental image through PR/media campaigns
- *Data distortion*: Presenting distorted data, like a graph with manipulated axes to exaggerate environmental gains
- *False information:* Providing fabricated evidence about meeting regulatory standards

Association-based distraction
- *Environmental philanthropy:* Donating to environmental causes to distract from poor environmental practices
- Green endorsement: Using endorsements from organizations or influencers known for environmental advocacy

SOCIAL WASHING

Rainbow (LGBTQ+)
- *Symbol exploitation:* Using LGBTQ+ symbols, such as rainbow flags, only during Pride Month
- *False allyships:* Collaborating with LGBTQ+ influencers or organizations for promotional purposes only
- *Selective inclusion:* Highlighting LGBTQ+ roles to appear inclusive while deeper workplace inequalities persist.
- *Regionally inconsistent policies:* Supporting LGBTQ+ rights in progressive areas and opposing them in conservative ones
- *Hypocritical advocacy/campaigns;* Publicly supporting LGBTQ+ rights in progressive areas only

Pink (Women’s rights and health):
- *Time-limited themed campaigns:* Using women’s rights in time-limited ads to build a socially responsible image
- *Time-limited products/promotions* Launching time-limited products and/or promotions on women’s rights
- *Commodification of illness*: Exploiting health issues for marketing rather than advancing health or research

Sports:
- *Sponsoring events/funding new facilities:* Sponsoring large-scale events or building new facilities, to associate the company with the positive values of sports
- *Team ownership:* Buying prominent sports teams to gain favorable media coverage and build soft power
- *Athlete ambassadors:* Using prominent athletes to act as goodwill ambassadors exploiting their appeal
- *Sports diplomacy:* Using sports to foster relationships, presenting a cooperative and friendly image

DEI: (Diversity, Equity and Inclusion)
- *Surface-level diversity:* Claiming DEI support while not changing hiring, culture, or governance
- *Black/whitewashing:* Distorting history and/or events regarding minority social issues
- *Hypocritical advocacy/campaigns;* Publicly advocating for DEI while engaging in opposite behavior

Purple: (Violence against women)
- *Hypocritical advocacy/campaigns:* Campaigning against violence without implementing internal policies
- *Performative allyship:* Using celebrities for anti-violence branding without real actions

Brown: (Violence against women)
- *Labor exploitation:* Upholding ethical labor standards while operating under exploitative labor conditions
- *Human rights violation:* Using celebrities for anti-violence branding without real actions

4 DISCUSSION, LIMITATIONS AND FUTURE RESEARCH

The research questions if this manuscript were:

1) **Is sustainability washing a growing concern?**
2) **Which are the risks and consequences on brand equity of sustainability washing?**
3) **Which reference standards can be used to identify sustainability washing practices, and if none exist, how can a literature review help fill this gap?**
4) **What is a possible comprehensive classification of sustainability washing practices?**

In relation to question 1), Sustainability washing is a growing ad increasing phenomenon both on the environmental and the social side and it is a significant concern for customers, markets, investors and regulators. Regardless of the increasing intolerance by customers and authorities, companies find more and more multifaceted, intricate and ingenuous ways to respond to customers demand of more sustainability-friendly products and production processes by misleading them, taking shortcuts and reaping the short-term financial gains by misinforming customers on their sustainability practices without bearing the relative costs.

Regarding question 2), the surge in misleading practices may come with the company's conviction that they are harmless, but risks and consequences can be profound. Beyond short-term and long-term damage to brand equity, sales and market share, companies face many more risks and consequences. Financial consequences like stock price decline, limited access to equity and funding, undermining their possibility to sustain competition and grow, signal to customers that brands are not solid enough and not appealing to the market, creating brand disapproval distancing. More severe violations not only generate fines and penalties, which impact the brand financially, but devastates consumers' relationship with the brand. The high resonance in the media and the increased public awareness make customers feel humiliated for having sustained and promoted the brand, leading them to moral aversion and hate towards the brand. Finally, criminal charges, often spreading worldwide as scandals in the news, put the survival of the brand and the company at risk, undermine genuine efforts to promote sustainability and social progress by truly committed companies, eroding public confidence in corporate accountability.

As far as question 3) is concerned, the most authoritative frameworks or reference for sustainable environmental and social practices, like the SDGs, the ESG, the European Commission or the FTC, indicate what companies should do rather than what companies should **not** do. While they provide important guidelines on what sustainable practices are, they clearly appear not fit for purpose when it comes to clearly indicating sustainability washing actions. Companies, faced with shareholder and competitive pressure, take advantage of the ambiguity in norms and regulations, that almost invariably indicate what constitutes good sustainable practices, but don't provide enough clarity on which actions companies should not undertake as they represent sustainability washing actions. Authorities and regulators have failed so far to eliminate this ambiguity, and incidents are dealt with only when they are uncovered. The literature on the topic, instead, is rich with insights and clear description of these practices, and authorities might highly benefit from incorporating these understandings in their efforts to overcome ambiguity of regulations. Hence, a comprehensive classification of sustainability washing is not available from these sources, and it is best built through the literature research.

With respect to question 4), the literature review has uncovered and clearly defined a multitude of forms of sustainability washing, both on the environmental and on the social fronts, allowing for a fine categorization and classification, resulting in 5 categories and 16 practices for greenwashing and 6 categories and 21 practices for social washing.

The emerged fine categorization and classification of sustainability washing practices aims at providing managers with a fuller understanding of these practices and highlights the risks involved, so that they make more informed decisions. It also aims at fostering academic discourse on the relevance for brands of these actions.

The industry-neutral nature of the categories and practices described, and the multitude of industries covered by the reported literature makes the case for applicability to a broad set of, if not any, industry.

The study is limited by a current view of an ever-evolving phenomenon, so the research should be replicated in no longer than 2-3 years to detect whether a new set of practices emerged and investigate consumers' reactions in a changing context. The qualitative nature of the manuscript also calls for quantitative analyses to measure the frequency and the impact on brands of each practice. Finally, the research does not investigate the negative reaction towards companies applying true but potentially controversial sustainable practices, such as support for LGBTQ+ rights, which is "the dark side" of truly sustainable practices.

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