



Abstract | *The 1st Research Innovations in Sustainable Marketing: A Global Virtual Symposium*

Green or Greenwashed? Examining Whether and When Consumers Are Able to Identify Greenwashing

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Abstract: In today's market, both companies and consumers face the challenge of navigating the pitfalls of greenwashing when it comes to a myriad of new and existing green products. This study examines consumer perceptions of such products and questions whether they can accurately identify greenwashing. Failure to do so could undermine a market for genuinely green products and have potentially detrimental effects on society and the environment. Drawing on categorization theory, consumers may categorize a new product as either honestly green, greenwashed, or regular based on prior knowledge of different green cues. We tested this ability using fictitious cleaning products in a within-subject experiment (N = 174) conducted in Germany and found that consumers often fall for greenwashing when asked solely about their purchase intentions. It seems that only when the participants are asked about the perceived greenness and greenwashing of the products are they able to spot the differences inherent to the green products. This research makes two academic contributions. First, our results extend the literature on consumer perceptions of green(washed) verbal and visual product cues. Second, we provide initial evidence against the implicit assumption in the greenwashing and green advertising literature that consumers can distinguish between greenwashed and honestly green prod-

ucts. Our findings provide potential guidance for practitioners in communicating sustainable product improvements without creating an impression of greenwashing. At the same time, this research may inform public policy regarding further measures needed to help consumers unmask greenwashing in purchase contexts.

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