

GreenCons

Conscious Lifestyle: Increasing Anti-greenwashing skills and competences of Adults



Comparative analysis of greenwashing case studies

23.02.2026

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1. Introduction

In recent years, environmental and sustainability claims have become a central element of marketing and corporate communication. From food packaging to fashion labels, from energy products to financial services, consumers are increasingly exposed to messages that promise environmental responsibility, ethical sourcing, or reduced climate impact. At the same time, concerns about **greenwashing**, the **practice of presenting products, services or companies as more environmentally friendly than they actually are**, have grown significantly. For consumers, this creates confusion and mistrust. For adult educators, it raises the need for clear, concrete examples that go beyond abstract definitions.

Greenwashing: *the practice of presenting products, services or companies as more environmentally friendly than they actually are*

This report brings together and analyses a collection of greenwashing case studies:

- national case studies developed by the GreenCons project partners in Turkey, Austria, Germany, Spain and Italy;
- a selection of well-known international cases involving large companies operating across multiple markets.

The aim is not to judge individual companies, but to identify patterns, understand how greenwashing works in practice, and highlight the most common greenwashing strategies used across sectors and countries. The report is intended for a general audience of adult consumers, as well as for adult educators interested in using real-world examples to raise awareness about the widespread phenomenon of greenwashing.

2. How the analysis was conducted

Case studies on greenwashing were included only if they met all of the following conditions:

- **Nationally known company or brand**
The company accused of greenwashing has wide visibility and a significant market presence, making the case relevant for a broad audience.
- **Sector with environmental impact or visibility**
Priority was given to sectors where environmental claims are frequent and influential, such as food and beverage, fashion, energy, transport, automotive, finance, and consumer goods.
- **Documented by reliable sources**

Each case is supported by at least one or two verifiable sources, including press articles, NGO reports, investigations, or institutional documents.

- **Recency**

Only cases from the last 10 years were considered, to reflect current marketing practices and regulatory frameworks.

- **Clear environmental or ethical claim**

The case involves an identifiable claim (e.g. slogan, label, certification, advertising campaign).

- **Observable consequences**

The case triggered visible reactions, such as media coverage, public debate, regulatory action, legal proceedings, or reputational impact.

These criteria helped us develop a coherent and comparable dataset, suitable for identifying recurring trends.

3. Overview of the cases analysed

3.1 Statistics

Number and origin of the case studies

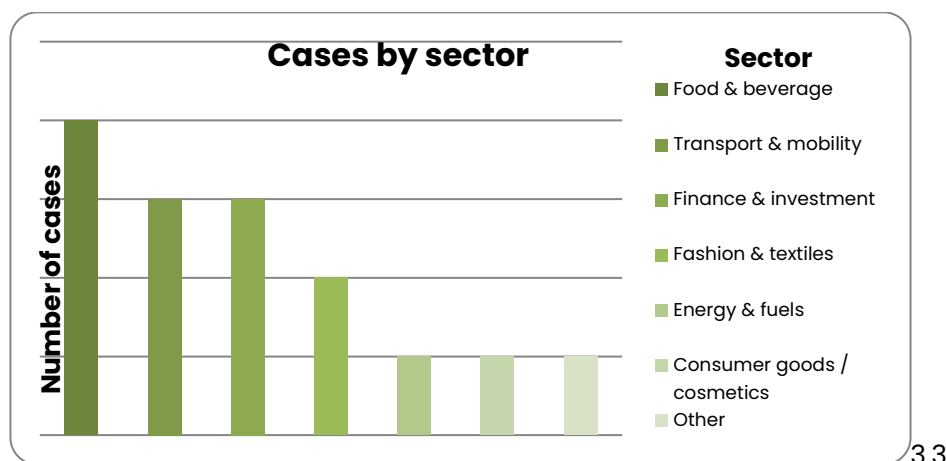
The dataset includes:

- 10 national case studies (two per partner country – Italy, Spain, Austria, Germany, Turkey);
- 5 international case studies involving globally recognised brands.

Sectors represented

The following sectors are represented: Food & beverage; Fashion & textiles; Transport & mobility; Energy & fuels; Finance & investment; Consumer goods / cosmetics.

Food, fashion and energy-related sectors clearly dominate the dataset, reflecting their high visibility and frequent use of environmental claims.



3.3

Company size and visibility

Most cases involve:

- large national brands or
- multinational corporations.

Only a small number involve medium-sized companies, and none involve purely local or niche businesses. This reflects the inclusion criteria and highlights that greenwashing is primarily an issue of mass-market communication.

3.2 Short summary of the selected case studies

Volkswagen – Dieselgate Emissions Scandal, 2015 – ongoing

Country: International

Sector: Transport & Mobility 

Types of Greenwashing: Fibbing; False labels and certifications

Summary: In 2015, the US EPA exposed Volkswagen's use of "defeat devices" in diesel cars, which allowed the company to cheat emission tests while heavily marketing "Clean Diesel" vehicles as eco-friendly. In reality, cars emitted up to 40 times the legal NOx limits. Volkswagen faced billions in fines, criminal charges, and reputational damage. Dieselgate remains the most infamous case of corporate greenwashing, classified as Fibbing and False labelling, and it reshaped environmental regulation in the automotive sector.

Starbucks – "100% Ethically Sourced Coffee" Claims, 2022–2025

Country: United States

Sector: Food & Beverage 

Types of Greenwashing: Fibbing; False labels and certifications

Summary: This case examines Starbucks' claim that its coffee is "99%" or "100% ethically sourced," used across marketing, packaging, and sustainability communications. In 2022, the National Consumers League filed a lawsuit in the United States alleging that the claim is misleading under consumer-protection law due to vagueness, selective disclosure, and lack of sufficient proof. U.S. courts rejected Starbucks' attempts to dismiss the case in 2024 and 2025, allowing it to proceed. Although no final ruling has been issued, the case highlights the risks of broad ethical-sourcing claims and has become a key reference in discussions on greenwashing in the food and beverage sector.

Shein – Misleading Sustainability Claims, 2025

Country: International

Sector: Fashion & Textiles 

Types of Greenwashing: Vagueness; Greening the image; Selective disclosure

Summary: In 2025, Italy's competition authority (AGCM) fined Shein €1 million for misleading sustainability claims in its marketing of the "evoluSHEIN by Design" collection and other products. The regulator found that terms like "sustainable" and "eco" were vague and omitted critical information about the company's overall environmental impact. The case illustrates Vagueness and Selective disclosure greenwashing: highlighting marginal improvements while concealing the consequences of an ultra fast fashion model. It is a landmark example of regulatory enforcement in the fashion sector.

Coca-Cola – Misleading Recycling and “100% Recycled” Packaging Claims, 2023–2025

Country: International

Sector: Food & Beverage 🍷

Types of Greenwashing: Vagueness; Greening the image; Selective disclosure

Summary: Between 2023 and 2025, Coca-Cola faced multiple legal challenges for its “100% recycled” and “100% recyclable” packaging claims. Regulatory complaints in Europe and lawsuits in the United States accused the company of misleading consumers by overstating the environmental benefits of its packaging. In 2025, Coca-Cola agreed to modify its EU claims and continues to face litigation in the U.S. The case represents a clear example of Selective disclosure, Vagueness, and Greening the image, illustrating how multinational brands use partial sustainability narratives to build a green reputation while maintaining high-impact production models.

Ryanair – “Europe’s Lowest Emissions Airline” Ads, 2020

Country: International / United Kingdom

Sector: Transport & Mobility 🚗

Types of Greenwashing: No proof

Summary: In 2019–2020, Ryanair launched advertisements in the UK claiming to be “Europe’s Lowest Emissions Airline.” The UK Advertising Standards Authority (ASA) banned the adverts, ruling that the claim lacked adequate proof and was misleading. The adverts were based on outdated and incomplete data, failing to provide fair comparisons. This case exemplifies the “No proof” type of greenwashing and highlights how regulators are beginning to tackle misleading environmental claims in aviation marketing.

Adidas – “Klimaneutral by 2050”, 2025

Country: Germany

Sector: Fashion & Textiles 👕

Types of Greenwashing: Hidden trade-off; Vagueness

Summary: This case concerns a legal action brought by the environmental NGO Deutsche Umwelthilfe (DUH) against Adidas AG before the Regional Court of Nürnberg-Fürth (Germany). The lawsuit challenged the company’s public statement “We will be climate-neutral by 2050”, arguing that it was misleading under the German Act Against Unfair Competition (UWG) because Adidas did not clarify how the neutrality goal would be achieved. In March 2025, the court ruled in favour of DUH and prohibited Adidas from using the claim in its existing form. The case is one of the first in Germany to address future-oriented climate neutrality statements and contributes to the broader European debate on regulating environmental and “green” marketing claims.

Deutsche Umwelthilfe v. DWS Group – Greenwashing Investigation and Fine, 2025

Country: Germany

Sector: Finance & Investment 💰

Types of Greenwashing: Hidden trade-off; Fibbing; Vagueness

Summary: This case involves a €25 million fine imposed on DWS Group, the asset management arm of Deutsche Bank, by the Frankfurt Public Prosecutor’s Office in 2025. The investigation found that DWS had exaggerated the proportion of its investment funds classified as ESG or sustainable. The company’s marketing materials claimed that a large share of its assets was managed according to ESG principles, but internal documentation did not support these statements. The case represents

one of the first high-profile examples of greenwashing enforcement in the European financial sector and illustrates the growing regulatory focus on verifying environmental and sustainability-related investment claims.

Red Bull: Greenwashing in Lifecycle of the Aluminum Can, 2022

Country: Austria

Sector: Food & Beverage 🇦🇹

Types of Greenwashing: No proof; Vagueness; Selective disclosure

Summary: Red Bull promotes the sustainability of its aluminum cans by emphasizing their recyclability and claiming that recycling aluminum saves up to 95% of the energy compared to producing new aluminum. However, this claim is misleading due to a lack of transparency about the actual recycled content in its cans and the omission of the significant environmental impacts of virgin aluminum production, including environmental costs of a large distant transportation of raw materials, deforestation and toxic waste generation. Despite highlighting these benefits, Red Bull has not disclosed verifiable data on recycled aluminum use nor addressed broader lifecycle impacts such as extensive global transportation of materials.

Austrian Airlines – the impossible CO₂-neutral flight, 2023

Country: Austria

Sector: Transport & Mobility 🇦🇹

Types of Greenwashing: No proof; Lesser than two evils; Selective disclosure

Summary: Austrian Airlines advertised flights to the Venice Biennale Arte exhibition with the promise: "Fly CO₂-neutral to the Biennale? No problem for us! 100% SAF". The campaign ran across social media and the company website. Customers could purchase a "sustainability option", with AUA promising to calculate their personal fuel consumption and add an equivalent amount of Sustainable Aviation Fuel (SAF) to future flights – creating the impression of complete carbon-neutral air travel.

San Benedetto – "CO₂ Impatto Zero" / EcoGreen, 2019-2025

Country: Italy

Sector: Food & Beverage 🇮🇹

Types of Greenwashing: Lesser of two evils; No proof; Vagueness

Summary: In August 2025, the Italian Competition Authority (AGCM) required San Benedetto to remove its "CO₂ Impatto Zero" claim from EcoGreen bottled water. The claim was considered potentially misleading, as it lacked transparency, independent verification, and could lead consumers to believe the product had no environmental footprint. San Benedetto voluntarily withdrew the message and revised its packaging. The case exemplifies Vagueness, No proof, and Lesser of two evils greenwashing—typical of brands that highlight marginal improvements to rebrand inherently unsustainable products as "green."

ENI – "Diesel+ is green", 2020-2024

Country: Italy

Sector: Energy & Fuels 🇮🇹

Types of Greenwashing: Hidden trade-off; False labels or certifications; Vagueness

Summary: Eni's "Diesel+" campaign presented a diesel fuel with a 15% renewable component as "green" and "environmentally friendly." The Italian competition authority (AGCM) ruled that these

claims were misleading because they overemphasized a marginal improvement while concealing the overall environmental impact of fossil fuels. Eni was fined €5 million in 2020 – Italy’s first major greenwashing penalty. Although the fine was later annulled, the case remains a key precedent for hidden trade-off, vagueness, and false labelling greenwashing, and continues to influence national and EU discussions on truthful environmental communication.

Laboratorios Byly, S.A. – “Byly Orgànic Té verd” Case, 2024–ongoing

Country: Spain

Sector: Consumer goods / Cosmetics 🧴

Types of Greenwashing: Lesser of two evils; No proof; Vagueness; Greening the image

Summary: In February 2024, the environmental NGO Ecologistes en Acció filed a formal complaint with Agència Catalana del Consum (ACC) against the cosmetics brand Byly for allegedly using misleading “green” claims in the labelling and advertising of its products (notably the deodorant “Byly Organic Té Verd” –Byly organic green tea–).

According to the complaint, Byly’s use of terms such as “organic”, “bio” or “eco” on its packaging creates the false impression that the ingredients are natural and sustainably produced – although the ingredient list shows that most components are of chemical origin, and the company has provided no evidence of compliance with EU organic–production standards.

Stoneweg Spain S.L. – “Jardins de Sa Riera Living” Case, 2024–ongoing

Country: Spain

Sector: Real Estate & Construction 🏠

Types of Greenwashing: Lesser of two evils; No proof; Vagueness; Greening the image

Summary: The Agència Catalana del Consum (ACC), the consumer protection agency of the Catalan Government, initiated an official sanctioning procedure against Stoneweg Spain S.L. in August 2024 for alleged deceptive environmental claims related to its luxury housing development, “Jardins de Sa Riera Living,” in Begur (Costa Brava). The case, triggered by environmental groups, centers on the company’s misleading use of “green” terminology in marketing materials to describe a project that involved deforestation, potentially constituting greenwashing under the Spanish Unfair Competition Act. This action marks the first formal prosecution of greenwashing in Spain, setting a critical legal precedent, although a final ruling and penalty amount are still pending.

TEB “Dünya İçin İyilik” Advertisement, 2022

Country: Turkey

Sector: Finance & Investment 💰

Types of Greenwashing: No proof; Vagueness; Greening the image

Summary: In 2022, Türk Ekonomi Bankası (TEB) launched the “Dünya İçin İyilik” (“Goodness for the World”) campaign, promoting its digital banking platform CEPTETEB as a way to achieve a “zero-carbon lifestyle.” The Advertising Board determined that these claims were unsubstantiated and misleading, as no evidence supported the alleged environmental impact. The campaign’s use of vague and emotionally appealing language exemplified greenwashing through no proof and vagueness. The Board suspended the advertisements and fined TEB, setting a precedent for stricter control over environmental marketing claims in Turkey’s financial sector.

İş Bankası “Çevreci Krediler” Campaign, 2023–2024

Country: Turkey

Sector: Finance & Investment 

Types of Greenwashing: Hidden trade-off; No proof; Vagueness

Summary: Türkiye İş Bankası launched the “Çevreci Krediler” (“Eco Loans”) campaign to promote housing and vehicle loans labeled as environmentally friendly. The Advertising Board found these advertisements misleading because they lacked verification mechanisms and data supporting the claimed environmental benefits. The campaign’s use of vague and optimistic language exemplified greenwashing under no proof, vagueness, and hidden trade-off. The Board ordered suspension of the ads and warned the bank to adhere to transparency principles in future environmental marketing, establishing one of Turkey’s first precedents for greenwashing in financial services.

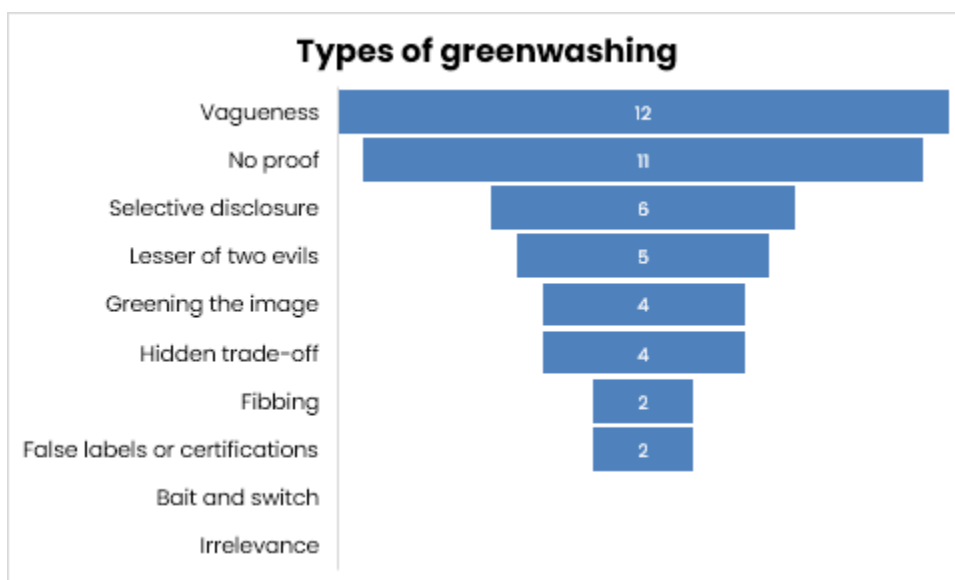
4. Types of greenwashing most frequently observed

Which misleading strategies appear most often? Using the shared analytical framework, each case was classified according to one or more greenwashing types (see Annex III).

Frequency of greenwashing types

The most frequently observed types of greenwashing are:

- **Vagueness:** The use of undefined terms such as “green”, “eco-friendly” or “ethical” without explaining what they actually mean in practice (e.g. a product labelled “sustainable” with no further information).
- **Selective disclosure:** Highlighting a single positive aspect while omitting relevant negative impacts (e.g. promoting recyclable packaging while ignoring the product’s overall environmental footprint).
- **No proof:** Making environmental claims without providing verifiable evidence to support them (e.g. stating “carbon neutral” without explaining how emissions were calculated or offset).
- **Hidden trade-off:** Focusing on one environmental improvement while concealing significant environmental harm elsewhere in the product or service lifecycle (e.g. using recycled materials in a product that remains highly polluting overall).
- **Greening the image:** Creating an environmentally friendly impression through imagery, colours or storytelling (e.g. nature imagery used in advertising with little factual content).
- **Lesser of two evils:** Presenting a product or service as environmentally responsible simply because it is less harmful than alternatives, even though it still has a significant negative impact (e.g. promoting “lower emissions” fossil fuels).
- **False labels or certification:** Using labels, logos or certification-like symbols that suggest independent verification, when the scheme is self-defined or not a recognised sustainability certification (e.g. internal “green” badges presented as external guarantees).



Many cases do not rely on a single greenwashing type but a combination of different types. This shows that greenwashing is often layered, combining visual, linguistic and informational strategies.

5. Sector-specific patterns

5.1 Food and beverage



In the food and beverage sector, greenwashing often revolves around claims related to packaging, sourcing, and climate impact. Companies frequently emphasise recyclable materials, carbon neutrality, or ethical sourcing, while providing limited information on agricultural practices, supply chains, or overall environmental footprint. Visual elements such as green colours, natural imagery, and references to “nature” or “tradition” play a strong role in shaping consumer perception. As a result, isolated improvements are often presented as indicators of broad sustainability, even when the underlying production model remains unchanged.

5.2 Fashion and textiles

In the fashion and textile sector, greenwashing commonly appears through “sustainable” or “conscious” collections that represent only a small fraction of total production. Environmental claims often focus on materials (e.g. recycled fibres or organic cotton) while overlooking issues such as overproduction, fast turnover, and waste. Labels and tags frequently use vague language without clearly explaining criteria or thresholds. This creates

the impression of responsible fashion choices, while the overall environmental and social impact of the business model is rarely addressed.

5.3 Energy, transport and mobility



Greenwashing in energy, transport and mobility tends to rely on comparative narratives, presenting products or services as “cleaner” or “lower-emission” alternatives. Efficiency gains or technological improvements are often highlighted without acknowledging



absolute emissions or long-term environmental consequences. Fossil-based solutions may be framed as part of the climate solution, despite their continued contribution to environmental harm. This sector frequently uses a “transition” narrative that can blur the line between incremental improvement and genuine sustainability.

5.4 Finance and investment

In the financial and investment sector, greenwashing is often linked to ESG labels, sustainability ratings, or “green” investment products. These claims are frequently based on complex criteria that are not transparent or easily understandable for non-expert consumers. Marketing materials may suggest strong positive impact, while the actual composition of portfolios or investment strategies is only partially disclosed. As a result, consumers may overestimate the environmental or social benefits of financial products that primarily meet formal or minimal standards.



6. Common traits across national and international cases

Looking across national and international case studies, a number of shared characteristics emerge. These similarities suggest that greenwashing is rarely accidental and often follows recurrent communication patterns.

First, many cases rely on **broad and undefined language**. Terms such as “green”, “eco-friendly”, “ethical” or “sustainable” are frequently used without explaining what they mean in practice. This ambiguity leaves room for interpretation and makes it difficult for consumers to assess the real environmental impact.

Second, a common strategy is the **selective presentation of information**. Companies often highlight a single positive element—such as recyclable packaging, a pilot project, or a marginal efficiency improvement—while omitting broader or more problematic aspects of their operations.

Third, **visuals play a central role**. Across sectors, companies use nature imagery, green colour palettes and emotional storytelling to reinforce environmental associations, sometimes compensating for the lack of factual detail.

Finally, **responsibility is often subtly shifted onto consumers**. Recycling instructions, offsetting options or “conscious choices” are presented as solutions, even when the structural impact of the product or service remains largely unchanged.

7. Regulatory and institutional responses

7.1 Who intervenes, and how

Greenwashing cases are not addressed by a single authority. Depending on the country and the type of claim, different public institutions and regulatory bodies may intervene when environmental or ethical claims are considered misleading.

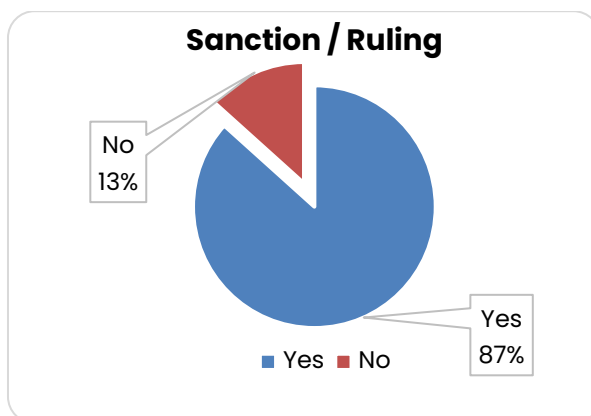
Most cases analysed in this report involve one or more of the following actors:

- **Consumer protection authorities**, which are responsible for enforcing laws against misleading commercial practices. These bodies can investigate complaints, assess advertising claims, and order companies to modify or withdraw misleading communication.
- **Advertising standards authorities**, often operating at national level, which review advertisements based on complaints from consumers, competitors or civil society. Their decisions typically focus on whether claims are substantiated, clear and not misleading.
- **Courts of law**, which become involved when cases escalate into lawsuits, class actions or judicial review. Courts assess whether claims violate consumer-protection or unfair competition laws and can impose binding decisions.
- **Financial and market regulators**, in cases involving investment products, ESG claims or sustainability disclosures aimed at investors.
- **Civil society organisations and consumer groups**, which often play a key role by filing complaints, initiating legal action, or bringing public attention to potentially misleading claims.

7.2 Types of interventions and sanctions observed

Across the national and international cases analysed, institutional responses typically include:

- Orders to withdraw or modify claims, requiring companies to remove misleading statements, labels or advertisements.
- Bans on specific advertising campaigns, particularly when claims are found to be unsubstantiated or overly vague.
- Administrative fines or financial penalties, in more serious or repeated cases.
- Judicial proceedings, which may result in court orders, damages, or long-term restrictions on marketing practices.
- Formal warnings or commitments, where companies agree to change their communication practices without a fine, often following an investigation.



In several of the analyzed case studies, proceedings are still ongoing, meaning that no final sanction has yet been imposed, but courts or authorities have recognized that the claims raise legitimate concerns.

While regulatory action against greenwashing is increasing, enforcement remains uneven across sectors and countries. Many misleading claims are corrected only after complaints are filed or media attention grows, and sanctions often focus on communication rather than on underlying business practices.

8. Implications and conclusions

8.1 What consumers can learn from these cases

The case studies analysed in this report show that greenwashing does not usually take the form of outright false statements. Instead, it often works through **partial truths, omissions and suggestive language**.

For consumers, this means that critical reading skills are essential. Rather than asking “Is this claim true?”, it is often more useful to ask:

- *What exactly is being claimed?*
- *What information is missing?*
- *Does this apply to the whole product or only to one aspect?*

Another key lesson is that relative improvements (“less polluting”, “better than before”) should not be confused with genuine sustainability. A product can be less harmful than an alternative and still have a significant environmental impact.

These cases show that informed consumers are better equipped to detect false sustainability claims and to avoid being misled by marketing narratives.

8.2 Implications for adult education

For adult education, real-world case studies offer several advantages. They:

- connect abstract concepts to everyday consumption choices;
- encourage discussion rather than passive learning;
- help learners recognise patterns across different sectors.

The cases collected in this project can be used flexibly: as discussion starters, comparative exercises, or tools to practise identifying greenwashing strategies. Importantly, they allow educators to focus on analysis rather than moral judgement, which is particularly effective with adult learners.

Using documented cases also helps build trust, as learners can see that concerns about greenwashing are supported by evidence, investigations and, in some cases, regulatory action.

The analysis of national and international case studies confirms that greenwashing is a widespread and cross-sectoral phenomenon.

Understanding how greenwashing works in practice empowers individuals to make more informed choices and to engage more critically with sustainability claims

9. Annexes

- Annex 1: List of national case studies
- Annex 2: List of international case studies
- Annex 3: Greenwashing typology reference table

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