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► **To cite this version:**

Béatrice Parguel, Johnson Guillaume. Beyond greenwashing: Addressing 'the great illusion' of green advertising. *Revue de l'Organisation Responsable*, In press. halshs-03425494

**HAL Id: halshs-03425494**

**<https://shs.hal.science/halshs-03425494v1>**

Submitted on 10 Nov 2021

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# **Beyond greenwashing: Addressing 'the great illusion' of green advertising**

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**Abstract:** This article critically reviews how marketing research has investigated green advertising and greenwashing over the past three decades. First, we present how the mainstream literature initially considered green advertising primarily as a branding project, until the greenwashing debate emerged in the 1990s and became the key focus of marketing research on climate change in the late 2000s. Adopting a more critical stance, we then argue that the unanimous and uncritical condemnation of greenwashing in the marketing academic literature actually helps to perpetuate the legitimacy of green advertising, and so prevents challenge to the foundations of the neoliberal agenda. We call this phenomenon the “great green illusion.”

**Keywords:** green advertising, greenwashing, CSR, regulation, self-regulation, neoliberalism

## **Au-delà du greenwashing : ‘la grande illusion’ de la publicité verte**

**Résumé :** Cet article interroge de manière critique comment la recherche en marketing a étudié la publicité verte et le greenwashing au cours des trois dernières décennies. Si la littérature mainstream a d'abord considéré la publicité verte comme participant des opérations de branding des marques et des organisations, le débat sur le greenwashing, apparu dans les années 1990, est devenu central à la fin des années 2000 dans les travaux conduits en marketing sur le changement climatique. Adoptant une posture plus critique, nous soutenons que la condamnation aussi rapide qu'unanime du greenwashing sert, en réalité, à préserver la légitimité de la publicité verte et à éviter de questionner les fondements de l'agenda néolibéral. Elle participe ainsi de ce que nous qualifions de « grande illusion verte. »

**Mots clés :** publicité verte, greenwashing, RSE, régulation, autorégulation, néolibéralisme

## 1. INTRODUCTION

In July 2021, France introduced one of the world's strictest laws against greenwashing. The country's parliament officially recognized greenwashing as a deceptive business practice, punishable by up to two years' imprisonment and fines of up to 80% of the cost of the greenwashed advertising campaign. The French Minister for the Ecological Transition stated that this law provided better redress against "those who seek to pull the wool over our eyes"<sup>1</sup>. After decades of worldwide controversies about green advertising and greenwashing, this official adoption of State regulation over self-regulation may be indicative of a revolutionary turn. Alternatively, as one member of parliament put it during the parliamentary debate, could it be just another form of greenwashing?

To address this question, this article critically reviews how marketing research has presented and questioned green advertising and greenwashing over the past three decades. As ecological concerns spread throughout societies in the early 1970s, environmental friendliness became a central point of appeal in advertising from the late 1980s onwards (Easterling et al., 1996; Peattie & Crane, 2005). This has naturally generated a rich body of literature in marketing scholarship (Ji et al., 2021; Lee, 2017).

We begin this brief musing by presenting how mainstream marketing research has mainly considered green advertising as a branding project, able to strengthen both commercial and corporate brand image. We then describe how the greenwashing debate, which initially emerged in the 1990s and expanded greatly in the late 2000s, became the key focus of marketing research on climate change. Finally, adopting a more critical stance, we look beyond current marketing research literature, and argue that the unanimous, uncritical condemnation of greenwashing actually helps to perpetuate green advertising, and prevents challenge to the foundations of the neoliberal agenda. We call this phenomenon the "great green illusion."

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<sup>1</sup> <https://www.assemblee-nationale.fr/dyn/15/comptes-rendus/seance/session-ordinaire-de-2020-2021/deuxieme-seance-du-jeudi-01-avril-2021#P2469207>.

## **2. THE LIGHT SIDE OF GREEN ADVERTISING**

“Green advertising” is the promotion of a company’s environmentally-friendly practices or of the environmental benefits of a product or service. In the literature, it appeared as a side product of Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR), defined by the Commission of the European Communities as the approach by which “companies integrate social and environmental concerns in their business operations and in their interaction with their stakeholders on a voluntary basis” (2001, p. 6).

The idea of CSR is that to survive long-term, companies should behave in a responsible way towards multiple stakeholders. It further encourages companies to measure, audit, and report on their responsible behavior, framed as “social and environmental performances”, similar to reporting on financial performance. In this managerial perspective, there is a virtuous cycle connecting environmental, social, and financial performances (Allen & Craig, 2016). The marketing literature provides two explanations for this virtuous cycle. First, CSR activities lead to cost reductions (e.g., energy savings and material input efficiencies, less packaging, rationalized logistics), which directly benefit a company’s financial performance (Monnot et al., 2019). Second, and most importantly according to some observers, the positive relationship between the three types of performance depends on environmental and social performances having a favorable effect on a company’s reputation and products (Dawkins, 2004; Du et al., 2010). This second effect is largely achieved by CSR communication, the channel through which awareness of environmental and social initiatives is raised among members of a company and its key stakeholders (Allen & Craig, 2016). In this article, we focus on a specific type of CSR communication, namely green advertising, which for a long time has mostly been treated as a “branding matter” in the marketing literature.

Extant research shows that green advertising enhances brand image by reinforcing the association in consumers’ minds between brands and positive environmental values (Benoît-Moreau & Parguel, 2011). This phenomenon relies on two

mechanisms (Schmuck et al., 2018). First, the promotion of environmentally sound attributes enhances the perception that the brand provides more benefits than a conventional brand. For instance, adding an environmental label (e.g., for low emissions or recyclable materials) can create the impression that the brand is superior to its competitors. Second, green advertising often includes visual representations of the beauty of nature, which activates pleasant feelings similar to those triggered by actual contact with nature (Hartmann & Apaolaza-Ibáñez, 2008), an experience that consumers viewing the ad may then transfer and associate with the brand. Many studies show that green advertising has a strong positive impact on consumers' attitude towards companies and their products, and therefore on purchase intentions and behaviors (Brown & Dacin, 1997; Creyer & Ross, 1997; Mohr et al., 2001; Murray & Vogel, 1997; Sen & Bhattacharya, 2001). Some studies further show that the power of green advertising extends beyond the organization's marketing function. For instance, it enhances "talent attraction" by signaling a workplace environment where employees are taken care of, and therefore increases corporate brand equity (Backhaus et al., 2002; Cable & Turban, 2003; Greening & Turban, 2000). In sum, marketing research has long argued that companies can derive clear financial (and other) benefits from using green advertising to communicate their commitment to the environment.

However, extant research has also identified many variables affecting the impact of green advertising on consumers' brand evaluation. First, the perceived credibility of the green commitment plays an important role in predicting consumers' attitudes (Bonnefont & Lapeyre, 2007; Newell et al., 1998): the more consumers perceive the green advertisement as a sincere reflection of the company's intrinsic motives (e.g., ethical values and moral leadership, the perception that being environmentally responsible is "the right thing to do"), the more they will express positive attitudes towards the brand (Du et al., 2010; Parguel et al., 2011). Variables affecting perceived sincerity also include the strength of the claim (Manrai et al., 1997; Tucker et al., 2012), the source through which consumers learn about the company's commitment to the environment (e.g., company sources vs. media sources), and the level of spending on the CSR cause itself relatively to the level of spending on

advertising it (Yoon et al., 2006). The core business of the company also needs to fit with the selected cause (Benoît-Moreau & Parguel, 2011). And a longstanding commitment positively impacts the consumers' attitude to the brand (Ellen et al., 2006). In addition to perceived sincerity, green advertising effectiveness is influenced by other variables such as media and execution decisions (Du et al., 2010), including the message channel, framing and tone, and advertising intensity (Kareklas et al., 2012, 2014; Kim, 2019; Minton et al., 2012; Rademaker et al., 2020; Rahman et al., 2017). Green advertising is also more effective for more harmful products (i.e., battery-operated products vs. cereals; Kong & Zhang, 2014) and companies that already have a better environmental reputation (Phau & Ong, 2007). Finally, it is affected by individual-level factors, such as green values and the level of environmental concern (i.e., the infamous "green consumer"), culture, regulatory focus, degree of identification with the company, advertising skepticism and ecological knowledge (Kareklas et al., 2012; Kim, 2019; Minton et al., 2012; Schmuck et al., 2018; Tucker et al., 2012; Xie & Kronrod, 2012).

This long list of potential moderating variables suggests that green advertising is not automatically effective. The famous "green gap" between consumers' declared intentions to buy green and their actual behaviors is known to partly reduce green advertising effectiveness (Fowler & Close, 2012; Lombardot & Mugel, 2017). Time also works against green advertising effectiveness. While green advertising was a significant signal in a period when only a few companies were committed to the environment, the power of that signal has faded as more and more companies now show an interest in environmental responsibility. As a result, green advertising has lost much of its credibility (Kangun et al., 1991; Mohr et al., 1998), especially among "green consumers" (Do Paço & Reis, 2012; Shrum et al., 1995). More specifically, although skepticism towards the practice has existed since the 1990s, it grew tremendously with the second wave of green advertising that emerged in the late 2000s, and continues unabated (Atkinson, 2017). This skepticism echoes increasing pressure from the media, NGOs, activist groups, and companies' other external stakeholders. In the marketing literature, this has resulted in the emergence of a wide-ranging debate surrounding greenwashing that we present next.

### 3. THE GREEN ADVERTISING SMOKESCREEN

With the massive increase of green advertising in the last thirty years, a side effect emerged in the form of “greenwashing” (Parguel et al., 2011), defined as “the act of misleading consumers regarding the environmental practices of a company or the environmental benefits of a product or service” (TerraChoice, 2010). Jay Westerveld coined this neologism in 1986 to criticize how hotel chains spent more time and money advertising a supposedly green practice than on the practice itself (Orange, 2010). He further noted that some of their discourses on environmentally-friendly practices (e.g., encouraging clients to re-use towels) were, in reality, strategies to reduce costs. Since then, the concept of greenwashing has been extended to companies, administrations, individuals, and generally any communicating entities, and refined (see Lyon & Montgomery, 2015). For instance, the claim by the French government that its 2021 climate plan is “ambitious” could be called “governmental greenwashing” (Cislak et al., 2021), as it falsely implies that the plan will lead to achievement of the ecological goals the French government committed to under the Paris Agreement, which is far from being the case<sup>2</sup>.

In the advertising context, Kangun et al. (1991) distinguish three categories of greenwashed advertising: employing false claims; omitting important information that could help to evaluate the environmental claim’s sincerity; and employing vague or ambiguous term (e.g., “natural”, “durable”, “clean”, “green”, “better”, “offset”). These three categories could be more bluntly summed up as lying, lying by omission, and lying by vagueness. But greenwashing really came to the forefront of marketing research in the late 2000s, “with a sharp increase in articles since 2011” (Lyon & Montgomery, 2015, p. 224). This followed a new surge in green advertising, which had almost tripled between 2006 and 2009, and an increase in

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<sup>2</sup> France’s 2021 climate plan is expected to achieve between half and two-thirds of the Paris climate agreement objective, set in 2015, of a 40% reduction in greenhouse gas emissions by 2030 compared to 1990. This impact estimate could even be overstated, as the EU has recently approved an updated and enhanced target of at least a 55% reduction for the same period, following the guidance of the European Council given on 11 December 2020. See <https://www.legifrance.gouv.fr/dossierlegislatif/JORFDOLE000043113774/> to access the government’s own impact assessment of its policy.

criticism of the practice and official debates about its regulation (see Parguel et al., 2015). As greenwashing came under increasing scrutiny by governments, the media, and NGOs, it began to develop in more subtle ways and the marketing research identified new forms of greenwashing in addition to “traditional” greenwashing focusing on claims (“claim greenwashing”).

Parguel et al. (2015) developed the notion of “executional greenwashing”, which refers to the use of nature-evoking elements in advertisements to artificially enhance a brand’s ecological image (e.g., a picture of a forest and the sound of birdsong). Similarly, “greenwashing by assimilation” proceeds by fallacious assimilations, such as “digital / electric / organic / second-hand / offset hence ecological.” For instance, car advertisements often assimilate electric and hydrogen vehicles to ecological vehicles, failing to mention the social and environmental impact of battery production. Finally, “greenwashing by association” involves the mere sponsoring of green events, projects, or programs, or the mere association with people or organizations perceived as having good green credentials. For instance, as “Pandaleaks” revealed, multinationals such as Coca-Cola, Shell, BP, Monsanto, and HSBC have partnered with WWF International to benefit from its green image, while carrying on their toxic businesses as usual (Huismann, 2014).

The above examples illustrate how greenwashing can be adopted out of pure opportunism by non-green companies for its performative potential. However, some authors argue that greenwashing may also be adopted by companies that are sincerely committed to the environment but unintentionally oversell their ecological credentials (Schultz et al., 2013; Siano et al., 2017). Deliberate or not, greenwashing-related misconducts and scandals have led consumers to develop a certain skepticism towards CSR (Forehand & Grier, 2003). Rim and Kim (2016, p. 250) define CSR skepticism as “publics’ inclination to question, disbelieve, and distrust towards an organization’s CSR motives, management and business, CSR outcomes, and the claims of socially responsible positions and actions”. They note that when combined with a generally low level of eco-literacy amongst the population, CSR skepticism may lead consumers to perceive greenwashing



everywhere, even where it is not actually present (Newell et al., 1998; Nyilasy et al., 2014).

The research commonly recognizes two types of greenwashing perception errors amongst consumers (Davis, 1992). Wrongly perceived greenwashing (type I error) and unnoticed greenwashing (type II error) both occur at the individual and societal levels. By misleading consumers into buying false green products, unnoticed greenwashing prevents consumers from making autonomous ecological choices and therefore raises important deontological questions (Chen & Chang, 2013; Gillespie, 2008). And when consumers wrongly perceive greenwashing, they forego the chance to take action for the environment by purchasing genuinely beneficial or less harmful products (Mohr et al., 1998). Either way, whether rightly or wrongly perceived, greenwashing damages corporate reputations and profits, especially for “truly” committed companies, which do not make a return on their investment in environmentally-friendly action (Kim, 2019; Newell et al., 1998). This traps “virtuous” companies in a sort of prisoner’s dilemma, where they have little incentive to persevere with their green practices although they are still communicating about those practices (Parguel et al., 2011).

Overall, authors are concerned that rising skepticism towards green advertising jeopardizes the whole CSR idea of a greener capitalism. Lyon and Montgomery (2015), for instance, note that a decrease in positive public attitudes and supportive intentions may hinder the success of CSR approaches and slow down the fight against climate change. Similarly, Chen and Chang (2013) argue that increasing skepticism towards green advertising may ultimately reduce companies’ general credibility, and marketplace efficiencies on green markets and beyond. Thus, green advertising has led to debates about greenwashing, and these debates have increasingly called into question the credibility of green advertising (not to mention the obvious ecological impact of releasing green advertising on not-particularly-green media, especially digital channels). In the next section, we take a more critical stance to question the political dynamics of the greenwashing debate.

#### 4. THE DARK SIDE OF GREEN ADVERTISING

Over the years, greenwashing has become the central focus of the debate surrounding marketing and climate change. But although the practice is undeniably deceptive, this focus can be unproductive given the very thin line between where advertising ends and greenwashing starts. Advertising is by essence a “washing” practice whose goal is to make an offer (more) appealing. There is a risk of allowing debates over “greenwashed” corporate strategies to cannibalize the critical discussion on marketing and climate change – especially if such debates overwhelmingly individualize the misconduct and thus distract from more structural issues. Beyond calling out specific brands or ad campaigns, there is a need to consider the broader political dynamics of green advertising. Engaging in criticism of greenwashing and greenwashers while ignoring the politics of green advertising contributes to what we call the “great green illusion.”

One illustration of this phenomenon can be found in the different ways governments deal with green advertising for automotive vehicles. Norway banned the practice in 2007 as no car can be “green”, “clean” or “environmentally-friendly”<sup>3</sup>. Framing cars as polluting products, such a ban is considered an essential step in the fight against climate change – similar to the ban on tobacco advertisements in the 1990s in the fight against smoking-related diseases<sup>4</sup>. In France, rejecting the idea of a ban, the government has adopted a much more moderate position in its 2021 environmental law, requiring the automotive industry to elaborate its own green advertising guidelines. France’s Minister for the Ecological Transition argues that self-developed codes of good conduct will allow the sector “to make commitments for more virtuous advertising in terms of the climate and the environment”<sup>5</sup>. This discourse makes the assumption that green advertising (and the cars it promotes)

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<sup>3</sup> <https://www.reuters.com/article/environmentNews/idUKL0671323420070906?edition-redirect=uk>.

<sup>4</sup> <https://www.bbc.com/news/uk-53607147>, <https://www.smh.com.au/national/we-banned-cigarette-ads-now-we-should-ban-car-ads-too-20180312-p4z3y8.html>.

<sup>5</sup> <https://www.ecologie.gouv.fr/point-detape-sur-engagements-climat-du-secteur-publicite-mardi-23-mars-2021>.

can be part of the solution (vs. the problem) of climate change. More specifically, it highlights the French government's confidence that a successful ecological transition resides not only in the hands of individual actors (that "make commitments") but also in the power of the market (that produces "virtuous advertising").

This confidence in individuals and markets stems from the ideology that some describe as "neoliberal capitalism" or "neoliberalism", which views most aspects of society as a kind of market and argues that market forces can solve most (if not all) social problems, including environmental matters (Doane, 2005). However, unlike classical liberalism which conceives self-regulating markets as a natural reality, neoliberalism acknowledges that the *laissez-faire* economic philosophy is a political myth (Amable, 2011). As Polanyi (1944/2001, p. 145) puts it:

"There was nothing natural about laissez-faire; free markets could never have come into being merely by allowing things to take their course [...] [L]aissez-faire itself was enforced by the state [...] [it] was not a method to achieve a thing, it was the thing to be achieved. True, legislation could do nothing directly, except by repealing harmful restrictions. But that did not mean that government could do nothing, especially indirectly."

Neoliberalism cannot therefore simply be analyzed as a separation between the state and the market. On the contrary, the key assumption behind neoliberalism is that the ideal world order is one of "free" and "fair" competition between individuals, and that state intervention to guarantee such conditions is legitimate (Amable, 2011, p. 5). As such, neoliberalism is both an ideology which legitimates individual competition and a political agenda which institutionalizes *individualization* against any attempt to institute "collectivism" (Amable, 2011).

Foucault, through the concept of "governmentality", further theorizes how such *individualization* operates. He posits that neoliberal governmentality acts to align the conducts of individuals with its own socio-political objectives, not through clear coercion, but in disguised form, presented as an encouragement of free and autonomous economic activity (Dubuisson-Quellier, 2016). The state encourages

all private market actors (e.g., organizations, consumers, citizens) to “give their lives a specific entrepreneurial form” (Lemke, 2001, p. 202) and take responsibility, in other words become accountable, for the moral welfare responsibilities that were historically assigned to civil society and governments (Giesler and Veresiu 2014; Shamir 2008). Applied to the current global environmental crisis, this transfer of responsibility (or *responsibilization*) translates into 1) encouraging organizations to self-discipline to strike the right balance between their social, environmental, and economic performances; and 2) expecting consumers to lead the change, notably through their consumption habits. Echoing Foucault’s governmentality concept, green advertising is clearly central to the operations of the neoliberal agenda, as it aligns the conduct of individuals with broader socio-political objectives, by channeling the exercise of their economic freedom in certain directions, without imposing direct discipline or restrictions.

In practice, green advertising is often the only thing available to environmentally-concerned stakeholders to evaluate ecological practices, and it can thus shape the way citizens (not only consumers) understand the environmental context. Its frequent, widespread use has the power to create the illusion that specific environmental problems are under control (Davis, 1992). In doing so, it alleviates environmental concerns and reduces the perceived urgency of climate change action among citizens. People may come to believe that introducing legally-binding regulations is unnecessary, since similar objectives can be reached by other means. For instance, recent market reports suggest that consumers are increasingly tending to trust brands and companies more than governments as a source of information, and also to build a better future<sup>6</sup>. In line with the individualizing ambition of neoliberal governmentality, green advertising acts as a soft law which shifts lawmaking away from parliament and onto private bodies, minimizing public, legally-enforceable rules and favoring private, voluntary, non-binding commitments (Bodet & Lamarche, 2013; Lamarche, 2009). Green advertising

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<sup>6</sup> [https://www.ipsos.com/sites/default/files/ct/publication/documents/2020-09/ipsos\\_20-09-60\\_core\\_pov\\_v4.pdf](https://www.ipsos.com/sites/default/files/ct/publication/documents/2020-09/ipsos_20-09-60_core_pov_v4.pdf), <https://havasmedia.com/fr/building-meaningful-is-good-for-business-77-of-consumers-buy-brands-who-share-their-values/>.

allows CSR actions to be promoted and perceived as a realistic alternative to laws and regulations. Consequently, it needs to be protected from “bad apples” (the “greenwashers”) who could jeopardize its credibility. Condemning greenwashing as a practice by unscrupulous individual advertisers helps to shift the nature of environmental regulation away from collective to more individual solutions (Hanlon & Fleming, 2009). Guaranteeing “virtuous green advertising” is therefore a legitimate mission for the neoliberal state, as it restores consumers’ confidence that the market options available to them are the fruits of “free” and “fair” competition. Well-informed consumers should then prefer green products, and this preference should persuade companies to adapt their production. Ultimately, the market should find a new, greener balance.

But this individualized approach to social problems, relying on consumers to correct the world’s wrongs, is doomed to fail. Most consumers in the marketplace are neither particularly interested in, nor capable of, righting the world’s wrongs (Eikenberry, 2009). In contrast to the theoretical position of citizens who share in the collective authority, consumers have little opportunity to consider in depth the fundamental political and economic structures which create social problems in the first place (Eikenberry, 2009). And even if consumers do change their behavior, the impact of their behavioral changes on the environment remains minor. One study by Carbon4, a consultancy firm specialized in carbon reduction strategies, reveals that if all individuals’ behaviors were to become environmentally perfect, that could only contribute 25% of the target reduction in greenhouse gas emissions<sup>7</sup>. The study considers that the rest of the target can only be achieved through public policies. The Covid-19 crisis further exemplifies the need to focus on structural vs. individual changes. COVID-19 lockdowns significantly curbed carbon emissions in 2020, but the 6.4% fall in global carbon dioxide emissions was still lower than the goal set in the 2015 Paris climate agreement, which is 7.6% per year. Since extreme lockdowns are impossible to maintain in the long run, scientists conclude that long-term emissions decreases “must be based on structural and

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<sup>7</sup> <http://www.carbone4.com/wp-content/uploads/2019/06/Publication-Carbone-4-Faire-sa-part-pouvoir-responsabilite-climat.pdf>.

transformational changes in energy production systems, de-carbonization of transportation and improved building energy use efficiency, that is an improvement of the carbon intensity of economies rather than decreases of human activities” (Liu et al., 2020, p. 7).

## **5. CONCLUSION**

This article offers a brief but comprehensive historical journey through the marketing scholarship on green advertising. It highlights how green advertising, and later greenwashing, have been the focus of a rich body of literature which details how consumers respond to green advertising, and provides useful tools to understand and overcome greenwashing. Yet this important research effort can be seen as an instrumental legitimizing strategy for a discipline which is often readily associated with lies, deception, and manipulation (Sheth & Sisodia, 2005).

Extending Dholakia et al.’s (2021) powerful argument against the “broadening of the concept of marketing”, we contend that despite its noble aim, the broadening of advertising research into environmental matters (from ads to green ads to the criticism of greenwashing) generally misses the mark. The branding perspective typically used by the extant literature to analyze green advertising has overlooked its oxymoronic nature and thus masked its broader political agenda, namely institutionalizing individualization. In other words, the marketing research overlooks the fact that green advertising operates as a political discourse which is helping to shift the nature of environmental lawmaking away from collective to more individual solutions (Hanlon & Fleming, 2009). By alleviating citizens’ green anxiety, green advertising creates the impression that the environmental crisis is under control thanks to voluntary action by private individual actors, such as companies and consumers, and helps to reinforce the neoliberal agenda’s legitimacy. We propose to label this trick the “great green illusion.”

Making greenwashing the main focus of criticism extends this illusion further, as it (implicitly) reinforces the idea that “good” green advertising is possible as long as

“bad apples” are detected and excluded. In other words, condemning greenwashing and greenwashers at a micro-level makes it possible to both individualize and depoliticize the issue and so preserve the overall credibility of green advertising and (a greener) capitalism. This echoes what Guénin-Paracini et al. (2014, p. 318) described in the aftermath of the 2008 global financial crisis: “crises of neoliberal capitalism often trigger scapegoating processes, whose result is to deflect criticisms expressed in the public arena from neoliberalism per se towards specific actors.” In the green advertising context, greenwashers serve as readily available scapegoats to divert attention away from the corporate world’s refusal to take more radical action to address global warming and climate change (Kilbourne, 1995).

This phenomenon is apparent in the stance of the French government, which in the same parliamentary debate decided both to penalize greenwashing – as mentioned in the introduction – and encourage self-regulation for more “virtuous advertising.” Rather than a revolutionary turn, France’s new anti-greenwashing law, whose real effectiveness is still being debated<sup>8</sup>, may be just another form of greenwashing which avoids challenging the neoliberal agenda by giving the impression that the problem is being addressed – the “great green illusion.”

To conclude this article, we would urge marketing (and other) scholars to further consider how criticism may (inadvertently?) reinforce the object of criticism. Although we focus here on greenwashing, we believe that our “great illusion” argument extends to other forms of “washing” (e.g., “social-washing”, “purpose-washing”, “diversity-washing”, “woke-washing”, “pink-washing”, “purple-washing”, “vegan-washing”, “fair-washing”). We contend that any marketing strategy, from the initial positive reception of a new advertising trend to later accusations of some kind of “washing”, should be carefully contextualized and

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<sup>8</sup> From a technical standpoint, this amendment is part of French commercial, not environmental, law. As such, it only applies to commercial (advertising) practices and does not extend to more general corporate communication nor other types of communication. Furthermore, the wording of the law is quite vague and imprecise, raising doubts about its applicability, especially now that greenwashing can be found almost everywhere in many new and subtler forms.

analyzed within its broader political dynamics, never losing sight of the need for permanent questioning of the dominant market ideology and political agenda.

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