

Greenwashing ...

Climate Justice and Education



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Colm Regan - highlights the need to question the environmental claims made in adverts

In 2019, Hyundai launched a hydrogen powered Nexo car in the UK describing it as being 'so beautifully clean' that it 'purifies the air as it goes'. The company went further arguing that if 10,000 of its cars were on the road, carbon emission reduction would be 'equivalent to planting 60,000 trees'. The assertion that the new car could be driven without pollution sounded too good to be true (think tyre air particulates alone), and in June 2021 the UK advertising regulator found that it was.

In 2018, restaurant chain McDonald's declared an end to 1.8 million plastic straws a day in its UK restaurants declaring the move part of its 'greener' agenda. However, this 'good news' story turned out not to be so. Eventually, McDonalds admitted that the thickness of its new paper straws made them difficult to recycle currently despite claiming they were '100% recyclable'.

Green claims (often amounting to pure 'greenwashing') are now routinely used to sell almost any type of product from cars to plane tickets, soft drinks, cleaning fluids, washing machines, toiletries and, of course, fashion. All manner of companies have been criticised for making misleading or false 'green' claims from Ryanair to Innocent, IKEA, H&M Fashion and Shell ([find out more here](#)).

Going green is now de rigueur for business, and consumers are increasingly willing to pay more for eco-friendly products. Research suggests that the public (especially younger people) want companies to make environmental issues a much higher priority. In this context, 'greenwashing' a company or product is big (huge) business and is now a dominant form of advertising.

At the forefront of such greenwashing are fossil-fuel companies who currently spend multiple millions advertising their 'greenness', their commitment to the planet and its future, and their plans for decarbonisation while pushing ahead with expanding fossil-fuel production. For example, such companies spent US\$4 million on Meta ads alone in the lead up to Cop27 spreading false and misleading claims on the climate crisis (as they have done since 1977), on net-zero targets, and on the future need for fossil fuels.





Finally, it is important to consider the assertion of US environmentalist Bill McKibben who argued that

Climate change has made activists of us all.

**The choice is clear environmentally –
inactivism or activism**

As in so many other contexts, social media is now at the forefront of the environmental battle on greenwashing. Fossil fuel companies and the firms that work closely with them are big spenders on ads made to look like Google keyword search results, something environmental campaigners have described as ‘endemic green-washing’. In Ireland, Texaco is funding sports clubs while continuing to support a children’s art competition as a means of burnishing its fossil fuel agenda.

Under the umbrella of NGO Just Forests, a group of us have been directly involved in campaigning against their activities and have published a background paper and a suggested action agenda.

Most importantly, fossil fuel companies have worked assiduously to shift the environmental agenda to action by consumers and governments rather than themselves; they have sought to present themselves as honest and trustworthy partners for a better future. They have been heavily criticised for promoting a ‘great deception’ implying that companies at the forefront of driving the heating of the planet are in favour of sustainability.

The tactics of these and similar companies are, as has been true for decades, **denial, downplaying, deflecting, delaying, and even promoting despair.** As ever, education forms a key strand in challenging this damaging agenda.

In thinking how we can respond to this important agenda and debate, especially in the context of education, it might be useful to focus on some of the following:

- ☐ Discussion and debate about greenwashing and its purpose, as well as the issues behind it.
- ☐ Question activities taking a close look at ‘green’ adverts and products. Consider their wording and ‘hidden’ meanings.
- ☐ Develop skills to check sources of data / quotes.
- ☐ Learn about the different contexts of the debate, including its wider world, justice, and human rights elements.

