
Miscellaneous

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Submitted
September 2nd, 2024
Approved
May 2nd, 2025

© 2025
Communication & Society
ISSN 0214-0039
E ISSN 2386-7876
www.communication-society.com

2025 – Vol. 38 (2)
pp. 407-424

How to cite this article:
Prieto Mora, H. U., Cortés González, A., & Marullo, M. C. (2025). Between promise and practice: exploring greenwashing in Paris 2024 partners' communication, *Communication & Society*, 38(2), 407-424. <https://doi.org/10.15581/003.38.2.027>

Between promise and practice: exploring greenwashing in Paris 2024 partners' communication

Abstract

The article aims to identify and evaluate from a multidisciplinary perspective a sample of greenwashing complaints and lawsuits received during 2023 by sponsors of the Paris 2024 Olympic Games. From the communication sphere, a content analysis template is applied to advertising campaigns that have received greenwashing lawsuits and complaints alike during 2023 to explore how sponsors present their sustainability initiatives to the public, from a marketing point of view, the content analysis template is used to evaluate authenticity and effectiveness by analysing the packaging, brand promises, labelling and other marketing efforts made by sponsors accused of greenwashing, while from a legal perspective, the article focuses on greenwashing lawsuits received by various courts against the sponsors of the event, and discussing them. It was found that at least 44% of the sponsors of the Paris 2024 Olympics were identified as having used greenwashing practices during 2023 and it is concluded that 54.5% of these complaints/lawsuits would be justified. This study is relevant due to the international impact represented by a sporting event like the Olympic Games, in which the organising committee is committed to sustainability as one of the pillars of the event. In addition, at a social level, the article allows consumers to identify possible greenwashing actions by internationally known companies to evaluate their commitment to sustainability. At a business level, the study provides companies with a better understanding of the phenomenon of greenwashing so they can avoid engaging in these practices.

Keywords

Greenwashing, communication, sustainability, marketing, Paris 2024.

1. Introduction

1.1. Contextualisation and justification

The Paris 2024 Olympic Games, currently being held as this article is being written, not only promise to be a celebration of sporting spirit and global athletic talent, but they are also committed to the inclusion of sustainable practices (Paris 2024 Organising Committee, 2023). The event's sponsors and partners face an immense responsibility within this important context: to align their corporate values and business operations with the ideals of environmental sustainability that the world



demands and that the organising committee of the Games has established as one of the event's main commitments.

While many sponsors of the Olympic Games lay claim to these virtues in their communication and marketing strategies, we should ask what their true level of commitment to sustainability is. In other words, to what extent do their actions truly reflect the commitments they say they make in their communication and marketing efforts or whether many of these efforts involve dishonest practices.

The perception of a discrepancy between an organization's environmental protection claims and its actual practices is identified as greenwashing (Keilmann & Koch, 2023); this phenomenon has increased progressively and deserves careful examination. It is no longer enough for organisations to simply be efficient and provide value; they also have to be responsible, and this includes responsibility towards the environment (Siyambalapitiya, Zhang & Liu, 2018).

Along these lines, it is pertinent to use a global event like Paris 2024, considering the large amount and high level of quality of communication expected for it, to provide a broad perspective on the phenomenon of greenwashing amongst its sponsors. We consider this study to be relevant and necessary as it offers a lens through which we can evaluate the integrity and real impact of corporate sustainability initiatives on a global stage and which, due to their relevance, can cascade down into other companies. In addition, it reflects how brands try to position themselves before an increasingly aware and demanding public with regard to environmental issues (Batol & Iqbal, 2016). Analysing the potential presence of greenwashing practices among the sponsors of Paris 2024 allows us not only to evaluate the integrity of their sustainable initiatives, but also to reflect on the real environmental legacy that this sporting event intends to leave. This analysis is particularly important given the significant impact of international events like Paris 2024 on millions of people, and their ability to set precedents in terms of sustainability regulations for future events and even other contexts.

To study the authenticity and depth of the sustainability campaigns projected by the global, premium and official sponsors of Paris 2024, we set out to find out which sponsors have been accused of greenwashing practices during 2023 (the year prior to the Games) and analyse these complaints from a multidisciplinary point of view: from the legal sphere, the focus will be on greenwashing lawsuits¹ received by various courts against the sponsors of the event, and discussing them. From the communication sphere, a content analysis template, previously proposed and validated by Nemes et al. (2022), will be applied to advertising campaigns that have received greenwashing lawsuits and complaints² alike during 2023 to explore how sponsors present their sustainability initiatives to the public; from a marketing point of view, the same content analysis template will be used to evaluate authenticity and effectiveness by analysing the packaging, brand promises, labelling and other marketing efforts made by sponsors accused of greenwashing to disseminate a sustainable brand image.

¹ "Lawsuit" refers to the legal process (that is, the court case) by which a court of law makes a decision on an alleged wrong [as exhibited in the statement: a complex lawsuit that may take years to resolve] (Merriam-Webster Dictionary, 2024). In terms of this article, we will use the term for legal processes against companies for misrepresenting or omitting environmental information, or for using misleading forms of advertising, presenting their products as green or environmentally friendly, using alleged environmental information for greater economic benefit.

² "Complaint" refers to the initial document, or pleading, submitted by a plaintiff against a defendant that details how the plaintiff's legal rights were violated in some way and that sets forth the plaintiff's demand for relief, monetary or otherwise. In other words, complaint refers to the set of papers that outlines a likely following lawsuit. (Merriam-Webster Dictionary, 2024). In terms of this article, we will use the term for pleading submitted by a plaintiff against a defendant for misrepresenting or omitting environmental information, or for using misleading forms of advertising, presenting their products as green or environmentally friendly, using alleged environmental information for greater economic benefit.

1.2. *The aims of the article*

General aim: The article seeks to identify and evaluate a sample of greenwashing complaints and lawsuits that the global, premium and official sponsors of the Paris 2024 Olympic Games received during 2023 and thereby outline the sponsors' level of commitment to environmental sustainability, being one of the main commitments adopted by the Paris 2024 Organising Committee.

As Greenwashing complaints and lawsuits will be analysed in a multidisciplinary manner, the following specific aims have been determined:

- **Communication aim:** To evaluate the transparency, authenticity and consistency of advertising messages issued by Paris 2024 sponsors who have received greenwashing complaints and lawsuits during 2023.
- **Marketing aim:** To study the marketing materials and efforts used by sponsors to promote a sustainable and eco-friendly brand image, having received greenwashing complaints and lawsuits during 2023 to find practices that may constitute or conceal greenwashing.
- **Legal aim:** To discuss the sample of greenwashing lawsuits received by the sponsors of Paris 2024 during 2023, and compare them.

1.3. *Definition, origin and types of greenwashing*

The term greenwashing which derives from whitewashing, or money laundering, with a green connotation is based on two concepts: “green”, which symbolises everything related to the environment, and “washing”, which here implies superficial cleaning or covering up. Greenwashing thus refers to a marketing and communication strategy used by organisations and companies that seek to present themselves as more environmentally responsible than they really are (Freitas Netto et al., 2020; Chen & Dagestani, 2023), making “use of positive environmental information, which produces a distorted and biased image in favour of green aspects, interpreted as positive by consumers” (translation from the original Spanish; Hallama, et al., 2011).

This tactic seeks to take advantage of consumers' growing interest and sensitivity towards environmental problems, promoting products, services or corporate images that suggest an ecological commitment that does not correspond to the reality of their practices or impacts. In line with these ideas, the definition for the term proposed by Becker-Olsen and Potucek is given in the Encyclopedia of Corporate Social Responsibility (2013):

Greenwashing refers to the practice of falsely promoting an organisation's environmental efforts or spending more resources to promote the organisation as green than are spent to actually engage in environmentally sound practices. Thus greenwashing is the dissemination of false or deceptive information regarding an organisation's environmental strategies, goals, motivations, and actions.

The origin of this phenomenon dates back to the 1980s, when the environmental movement was beginning to gain strength and significantly influence public opinion and consumer decisions. The term was coined by the environmentalist Jay Westerveld in 1986 in an essay in which he criticised the hotel industry for promoting the reuse of towels as part of an effort to “save the environment”, while its business practices simultaneously showed little real concern for ecological issues (Freitas Netto et al., 2020).

Since then, greenwashing has become an increasingly common and sophisticated practice, adapting to changes in public perception and to technological and regulatory developments. Companies have evolved their strategies to range from ambiguous and unverified claims, to the manipulation of ecological data and investment in large-scale advertising campaigns, aiming to improve their corporate image in terms of environmental responsibility without necessarily making substantial changes to their operations or policies (Hussain, Haq and Soomro, 2020). Due to this

evolution and the sophistication of their strategies, various types of greenwashing are now discussed, such as the following put forward by Greenpeace:

Table 1. Stop Greenwashing from Greenpeace.

Type of greenwash	Description
Dirty Business	Promoting a product or programme as environmentally friendly, but the core of the business activity is largely unsustainable and polluting.
Ad Bluster	Targeted advertising and campaigns to exaggerate an environmental benefit in order to distract attention from environmental problems or when the costs of these advertising campaigns substantially exceed the costs of carrying out truly sustainable behaviours (if there are any).
Political Spin	Communicating “green” commitments, whilst lobbying against environmental regulations.
It’s The Law, Stupid	Communicating voluntary environmental achievements that are required by law anyway.

Source: Adapted from Greenpeace, 2022

According to Muñoz (2013) and Rodríguez (2021) there is a growth of environmental awareness among consumers and corporations. This may have an impact on the fact the phenomenon of greenwashing has attracted the attention of regulators and environmental protection organisations globally, finger pointing and complaints against companies accused of deceptive practices, some of them reaching the courts in the form of legal actions, increasing from 884 lawsuits worldwide in 2017 to 2,180 filed in 2022 (UN Environment Program, 2023). As a result, there is a growing number of investigations related to the topic, as it is stated by Freitas Netto et al. (2020) where it is shown that there is an increasing interest for the phenomenon of greenwashing in the literature, with a peak starting in 2017.

The legal response to these complaints has varied significantly in different jurisdictions, and this will be discussed in more detail in point 1.5. In some countries, the authorities have imposed substantial fines and have forced companies to change their advertising practices and communication. For example, in Europe, under the General Data Protection Regulation (GDPR) and other specific consumer protection laws, rulings have been issued setting out clear limits on the environmental claims that companies can make. Notable cases include actions against large car and energy companies, where complaints of greenwashing have led to the need to restructure advertising campaigns and, in some cases, to million-dollar fines.

The trend toward greater regulation and control of greenwashing appears to be gaining momentum, with new laws and regulations being enacted that call for greater transparency and authenticity in sustainability-related claims³. Furthermore, the growing participation of consumers, equipped with access to information and greater environmental awareness (Primožič & Kutnar, 2022), (Reichheld, Peto & Ritthaler, 2023), is emerging as a critical factor in the fight against greenwashing, demanding greater corporate responsibility and the fulfilment of environmental promises. According to Alejos Góngora (2013), this duality has two important effects:

- a) Companies that manufacture green products or develop green services require public recognition of their good deeds so that they can benefit from them—whether through increased sales, or an improved business reputation, or their relationship with interest groups.

³ For example, the European Parliament’s recent approval in January 2024 of a directive to prohibit the use of potentially misleading environmental indications. Available at: <https://t.ly/KYYq5>, date consulted: 29/03/2024.

b) Consumers depend on advertising, product labelling and monitoring to know whether companies' products, services or claims are truly sustainable. (Translation from the original Spanish)

However, "greenwashing strategies are becoming increasingly sophisticated" (Willis et. al., 2023), since in many cases, sustainable services or products have attributes that are difficult to observe or measure (Kirchhoff, 2000). In other words, there are "paradoxical tensions between their marketability and their potential to achieve substantive sustainability benefits" (Hahn & Pinkse, 2022).

There are two ways to communicate a commitment to sustainability (Green & Pelozo, 2014), which are either by emphasising benefits to the consumer (cost savings) or by highlighting social benefits (such as lower CO₂ emissions). Identifying and dismantling greenwashing is therefore crucial to ensuring that the commitment to sustainability is genuine and effective. Consumers, regulators and organisations dedicated to environmental protection play a key role in this process, demanding transparency, authenticity and concrete actions that support brands and organisations' ecological promises.

In line with the above, and in the absence of a unified integrative framework to evaluate possible bad business practices related to greenwashing, in 2022 Nemes et.al. proposed a methodology including 13 possible deceptive actions. For each of them at least one question is proposed for evaluation by the researcher, the answer to which consists of four options (no, yes, likely greenwash and unknown), representing an interesting tool that we will use in the analysis carried out in this article.

Table 2. Integrated framework of greenwashing.

Type of claim	Description
Selective disclosure	Claim is based on a narrow set of attributes and distracts consumers from the organisation's greater environmental impact
Empty claims	Making claims/policies that either exaggerate achievements, or fail to live up to them
Irrelevant	Proclaiming accomplishments that are irrelevant or already required by law/competitors
Lies	Claims are out-right lying
Just not credible	Claim touts environmentally friendly attributes of a dangerous or highly controversial practice/product/service/policy
Corporate responsibility in action	Claim does not reflect consistent organisational practice
Dubious certifications & labels	Claim has certifications that are prone to greenwash
Political spin	Claim boasts of green commitments, while the organisation lobbies against environmental laws
Co-opted endorsement	Claims that greenwash organisation's activities are endorsed by other organisations
No proof	Claim cannot be substantiated by easily accessible supporting information
Vagueness	Claim is poorly defined/broad so its real meaning is misunderstood
Misleading symbols	Claim uses visuals and symbols that induce a false perception of the organisation's greenness
Jargon	Claim uses jargon/information that consumers cannot understand/verify

Source: adapted from Nemes et al., 2022

1.4. *Sustainability in marketing: the current perspective*

For the past few years, consumers and corporations alike have turned their attention towards more sustainable and responsible practices (Hristov et al., 2022; Jia et al., 2023; Reddy et al., 2023) to the extent that sustainability has emerged as a key pillar of marketing and business organisation (Seth et al., 2020). The concept of sustainability, traditionally associated with environmental management and social responsibility, has therefore found new fertile ground in the marketing field (Márquez, 2020). The urgency to adopt sustainable practices in this area is fuelled by two main driving forces:

- a. consumer awareness and demand for products and brands that respect the environment and society, and
- b. the regulatory pressure that drives companies towards cleaner and more ethical operations.

This dual pressure has encouraged brands to reevaluate their strategies and business models from a perspective that not only seeks economic benefit, but also social and environmental benefit (Zhivkova, 2022). The principles of sustainable marketing are deeply rooted in ethics, transparency and responsibility, and require companies to go beyond mere legal compliance, seeking to integrate practices that reduce the environmental impact and promote social well-being in all phases of the marketing process, from the product concept to the post-sales stages. As we know, one of these phases involves communicating the product and that is where the authenticity of the discourses, supported by communicative sincerity (Nos Aldás, 2007: 244) and cultural effectiveness (Nos Aldás et al., 2013), should play a role. If this is not done, practices like greenwashing could appear, running the risk of severely damaging the brand's image.

Strategically speaking, sustainable marketing is manifested through responsible innovations in product design, packaging, the supply chain and communication. Leading brands in different industries have started adopting biodegradable or recyclable packaging, promoting the circular economy through recycling programmes, and using digital platforms to educate consumers on sustainability, among other actions. Furthermore, marketing campaigns that emphasise the environmental and social responsibility of products not only attract a growing segment of conscious consumers, but also cultivate a positive and lasting brand image.

However, the transition to sustainable marketing practices is not without challenges. The initial cost of implementation, the need for changes in the value chain, and the scepticism of certain consumer segments are obstacles to be considered. However, these challenges also present opportunities to innovate to the point that “the nexus between innovation and sustainability has become a linchpin for business viability and societal impact” (Sagar, 2023). Looking to the future, sustainable marketing is emerging as an indispensable element in brands' strategy. The adoption of emerging technologies and digitalisation offer new routes to minimise environmental impact and maximise the reach of awareness-raising campaigns. Likewise, collaboration between companies, consumers and other stakeholders is essential to amplify the positive impact of sustainable practices.

In conclusion, sustainable marketing represents a critical evolution in the way companies relate to their consumers and the planet. By adopting sustainable principles and strategies that also include what is being communicated, brands not only contribute to the solution of environmental and social imperatives, but also position themselves as leaders in an increasingly aware and demanding market. Far from being a passing fad, sustainability in marketing is seen as a key requirement for long-term business success and global well-being.

1.5. *The current legal framework in the fight against greenwashing*

From a legal perspective, the impact of greenwashing practices can affect competition in domestic and international markets, since these practices falsify information on companies' real environmental performance; we would be talking about unfair competition between companies in the same sector (Sales & Marullo, 2020; De Franceschi, 2023). Regarding financial matters, the European Union emphasises the problems that these practices generate in markets, defining the practice of greenwashing as “gaining an unfair competitive advantage by marketing a financial product as environmentally friendly, when in fact basic environmental standards have not been met” (Regulation 2020/852, Recital 11)⁴. At the same time, they could also mislead the consumer, which would lead to contractual liability in the relationship between the producer/seller and the final consumer (Marullo, 2023; Sales & Marullo, 2022). On this aspect, at the European level, Directive 2005/29/EC of the European Parliament and of the Council addresses unfair commercial practices by companies in their relationships with consumers in the internal market⁵:

Directive 2005/29/EC of the European Parliament and of the Council (1) on unfair business-to-consumer commercial practices in the internal market ('the UCPD') constitutes the overarching piece of EU legislation regulating unfair commercial practices in business-to-consumer transactions. It applies to all commercial practices that occur before, during and after a business-to-consumer transaction has taken place⁶

Article 3(1) shall apply to unfair commercial practices by companies in their relations with consumers before, during and after a commercial transaction in relation to a product. Article 2(d) of the Unfair Commercial Practices Directive defines “unfair commercial practices” as

Business-to-consumer commercial practices (hereinafter also referred to as commercial practices) means any act, omission, course of conduct or representation, commercial communication including advertising and marketing, by a trader, directly connected with the promotion, sale or supply of a product to consumers⁷.

It is worth mentioning that, at a supranational level, particularly at a regional and state level, progress is being made in negotiating binding legal instruments to detect deceptive practices and sanction companies, particularly in cases in which environmental declarations are false, cannot be verified or where relevant environmental information is omitted⁸.

Of greatest interest is the proposal for a directive on new standards to substantiate environmental claims (Green Claims Directive)⁹, the objective of which is to create a regulatory framework to substantiate environmental claims, establishing criteria for the different countries of the European Union to detect greenwashing, misleading statements and the use of labels and symbols that can mislead the final consumer and distort the situation

4 Regulation (EU) 2020/852 of the European Parliament and of the Council of 18 June 2020 on the establishment of a framework to facilitate sustainable investment, and amending Regulation (EU) 2019/2088. Available at: <https://t.ly/d7lD5>, date consulted: 29/05/2024.

5 DOUE C526, 29 December 2021, available at: <https://t.ly/A6PNQ>, date consulted: 29/03/2024.

6 Available at: <https://t.ly/yeYSO>, date consulted: 29/03/2024.

7 Available at: <https://t.ly/12bEL>, date consulted: 29/03/2024.

8 Greenwashing in legislation compared, available at: <https://rb.gy/yt4h73>, date consulted: 29/03/2024.

9 Proposal for a Directive of the European Parliament and of the Council on substantiation and communication of explicit environmental claims (Green Claims Directive), Brussels, 22.3.2023 COM (2023) 166 final 2023/0085 (COD), available at: <https://rb.gy/wnwkh4>, date consulted: 29/03/2024.

between companies in the European single market¹⁰. We are of the opinion that this directive, along with the proposal of the European Parliament and of the Council, amending Directives 2005/29/EC and 2011/83/EU with regard to the empowerment of consumers for ecological transition through better protection against unfair practices and better information¹¹, will lead to more precise and more reliable advertising or dissemination of environmental information in the very near future.

We also note how these new standards aim to make product labelling clearer and more reliable by prohibiting the use of general environmental claims such as “environmentally friendly”, “natural”, “biodegradable”, “climate neutral” or “eco” without proof, and the use of sustainability labels will be regulated, given the confusion generated by their proliferation and the lack of use of comparative data.

From a state perspective, the Canadian federal government is making amendments to the Competition Act, which currently prohibits misleading advertising, in order to specifically prohibit greenwashing, while in the United Kingdom, the government’s competition watchdog is focusing on environmental claims, taking enforcement action or opening investigations into companies that fail to comply with the Green Claims Code¹². In the United States and Australia, regulatory changes being proposed to prevent misleading ESG claims by funds, announced last summer, will take time to take hold and have the desired impact. The Australian Competition and Consumer Commission is entering into matters related to “consumer and fair-trading issues in relation to environmental claims and sustainability” in accordance with Australian consumer law and the priority list “Compliance and Enforcement Priorities for 2022–2023”.

2. Methodology

2.1. Sponsor selection criteria and case studies

In the case of the Paris 2024 Olympic Games, a total of 34 companies have taken up the role of sponsors/partners of the event and another 35 entities are collaborators, with the latter providing services and materials to carry out the sports competitions, for example, the company “Sodexo Live!” provides food for the almost 15,000 athletes who will take part in the Olympic and Paralympic games; the Japanese company Airweave is the brand of the mattresses for the Olympic village; Myrtha Pools is in charge of operating all the pools that are being used at Paris 2024, and Randstad is responsible for the recruitment and distribution of the organising committee’s team.

In the case of the 34 sponsor/partner companies, 14 have the rank of global sponsors of the International Olympic Committee, granting their members exclusive and global marketing rights for the Olympic and Paralympic Games. According to the IOC, their functions include actions like supporting the training and development of athletes around the world, activating global sporting experiences, carrying out marketing campaigns or providing essential services for competing athletes (IOC, 2023). Although for the most part the financial terms to belong to this group are not public, it is known that the agreements cover the sponsorship of several Games and that contributions from companies amount to hundreds of millions of dollars (Sportspromedia, 2023). The second group of sponsors of Paris 2024, known

¹⁰ ‘Green claims’ directive protecting consumers from greenwashing, Guillaume Ragonnaud Members’ Research Service PE 753.958 – March 2024, available at: <https://rb.gy/9prd22>, date consulted: 29/03/2024.

¹¹ Proposal for a Directive of the European Parliament and of the Council amending Directives 2005/29/EC and 2011/83/EU as regards empowering consumers for the green transition through better protection against unfair practices and better information, available at: <https://rb.gy/tpc5g9>.

¹² Available at: <https://rb.gy/kaepik>.

as “premium”, contains 7 companies, all of which are French. The Games represent a unique opportunity for them to connect with their domestic market at an event of such magnitude. It is estimated that these companies pay between 80 and 150 million euros to become premium sponsors and their contributions represent over half of the funds of French origin to hold the Olympics (Sportspromedia, 2023). Finally, there are 13 entities in the group known as “official sponsors” of which 80% are of French origin (like Air France, Carrefour or Decathlon) and whose role is more related to the organization of this event than to a recurrent or lasting sponsorship with the International Olympic Committee.

Taking into consideration the role assumed by the Games' sponsors and collaborators, in this paper the focus will be on analysing the global, premium and official sponsors of the Olympics, understanding that they play a clear role in contributing funding, rather than supplies or the provision of services, as is the case with collaborators. The selection of sponsors in the study therefore comprises the following companies, grouped according to the type of sponsorship they offer:

- Global: Airbnb; Alibaba; Allianz; Atos; Bridgestone; Coca-Cola/Mengniu; Deloitte; Intel; Omega; Panasonic; P&G; Samsung; Toyota; Visa
- Premium: Accor; Groupe BPCE; Carrefour; EDF; LVMH; Orange; Sanofi
- Official: Groupe ADP; Air France; Arcelor Mittal; Caisse des Dépôts; Cisco; CMA CGM; Danone; Decathlon; FDJ; GL Events; Ile-de-France Mobilités; Le Coq Sportif; PwC

Once the sponsors to be included in the study had been defined, we undertook the task of searching for complaints received by these 34 entities throughout 2023. This time frame was chosen due to the exploratory nature of the study and because after conducting the initial searches, we realised that a time frame of one year would provide us with a sufficiently large sample to proceed with the analysis.

The main difficulty we found to obtain the greenwashing cases is that since there is no unified legal classification of the practices reported worldwide, in the absence of a global database that compiles all greenwashing complaints we faced the challenge of obtaining results from several countries. This is because most sponsors are multinational entities that operate in multiple territories. Furthermore, considering the diversity of applicable laws and competent courts in cases of lawsuits, the decision was made to proceed as follows: the focus was on states that provide for specific legislation on this matter and in which there are state authorities and/or regional institutions (such as the European Union) with the jurisdiction to evaluate false environmental information, or misleading the final consumer with the use of symbols and labels that do not correspond to the company's actual environmental performance. For this purpose, a systematic search for each of the 34 sponsors was conducted using the world's most widely used online search engine, Google¹³. During this process, a publication date filter corresponding to the year 2023 was applied:

- “Name of sponsor AND greenwashing”
- “Name of sponsor AND greenwashing AND complaint”
- “Name of sponsor AND greenwashing AND demand”
- “Name of sponsor AND greenwashing AND class action”
- “Name of sponsor AND greenwashing AND litigation”
- “Name of sponsor AND écoblanchiment¹⁴”

¹³ According to Stat Counter Global Stats: <https://gs.statcounter.com/search-engine-market-share>

¹⁴ Since many of the event's sponsors are of French origin, it was decided to carry out this search in that language.

This inductive process was carried out with a supervisory procedure, and the evaluation of a pair of external researchers. The search yielded the following results: 15 of the 34 sponsors were accused of greenwashing during 2023¹⁵ or previous cases were responded to during that year. These 15 companies received a total of 22 complaints for possible greenwashing practices, making up the study sample, of which 14 are considered public complaints and 8 are formal complaints filed before the courts.

2.2. Analytical approach (communication, marketing and legal)

In order to determine the analytical approach to be carried out for each of the 22 complaints, we proceeded to identify the specific communication or marketing effort that was noted for having engaged in greenwashing practices. The following categories were obtained:

1. Google Ads (1 element)
2. Advertising campaign (4 elements)
3. Labelling (5 element)
4. Product attributes (1 element)
5. Packaging (3 elements)
6. Brand promise (3 elements)
7. Product (4 elements)
8. Business performance (1 element)

Taking this categorisation into account and considering the nature of the communication efforts made by companies, the decision was made to study the first two categories from the point of view of advertising communication, while the last 6 were studied with a marketing focus. Meanwhile, from a legal point of view, only the 8 formal complaints were studied, as the other complaints remained as public complaints without legal significance.

Once the above was completed, the analysis template for the three areas was developed. In the case of communication and marketing, an integrated analysis template was developed based on that proposed by Nemes et al., 2022, shown in table 3, while for the legal analysis, an analysis template was created that appears in table 4:

Table 3. Content analysis template (communication and marketing).

ID:	
Case:	
Sponsor:	
Image/access to audiovisual material	
Classification	Complaint or lawsuit
Possible type of greenwashing practice	According to the classification of 13 possible types by Nemes et al. (2022)
Description of the possible practice of greenwashing	Description of the complaint or lawsuit presented
Indicator question(s)	According to the indicator questions proposed for each possible type of greenwashing by Nemes et al., 2022
Reply	No; yes; probable greenwashing or non-conclusive
Conclusion	

Source: Produced by the authors.

¹⁵ The 15 companies are as follows: Air France, Arcelor Mittal, Carrefour, CMA CGM, Coca-Cola/Mengniu, Danone, Decathlon, EDF, Groupe BPCE, Le Coq Sportif, LVMH, P&G, Samsung and Toyota.

Table 4. Legal analysis template.

ID:	
Case:	
Sponsor:	
Nature of lawsuit	Consumer intervention
Actors	Who presented the lawsuit
Defendants	Sponsoring companies
Summary of arguments presented	Legal qualification of greenwashing practices
Court	Jurisdiction before which the lawsuit is filed
Comments on the lawsuit	Relevant aspects of the case
Status of the lawsuit	Pending, dismissed, appealed, judgement

Source: Produced by the authors

3. Analysis and discussion of the results

3.1 Results: Communication and marketing analysis

The 22 cases of greenwashing complaints and lawsuits in 2023 against sponsors of the Paris 2024 Olympic were analysed, and based on our content analysis in accordance with the proposal offered by Nemes et al. (2022), we observe greenwashing practices in 12 cases, which is the equivalent to 54.5% of the cases examined.

Table 5. Analysis of the different cases.

Sponsor	Case ID	Case	Type of case	Support	Type of complaint ¹⁶	Greenwashing
Air France - KLM Group	1	Travel better and sustainable	Complaint	Google Ads	Empty claims, Irrelevant; no proof; vagueness	Yes
	2	Fly responsibly	Lawsuit	Advertising campaign	Irrelevant; no proof; vagueness	Yes
ArcelorMittal	3	Virtually green	Complaint	Label	Dubious certifications & labels	Non-conclusive
Carrefour	4	Eco planet	Complaint	Labelling	Dubious certifications & labels; no proof; vagueness; misleading symbols	Yes
CMA CMG	5	'Clean' shipping fuel	Complaint	Product attributes	No proof	Non-conclusive
	6	New Zealand's white bottle Sprite	Complaint	Packaging	No proof	Yes
	7	100% recyclable bottles	Lawsuit	Packaging	No proof	Yes
Coca-Cola	8	Sustainable statements	Lawsuit	Brand promise	Corporate responsibility in action	Yes
	9	100% recycled plastic bottle	Lawsuit	Packaging	Selective disclosure; no proof	Yes
	10	World without waste	Lawsuit	Brand promise	Corporate responsibility in action	Yes

¹⁶ In accordance with the different types of claims described in Table 2.

Sponsor	Case ID	Case	Type of case	Support	Type of complaint ¹⁶	Greenwashing
Danone	11	100% recycled plastic bottles	Lawsuit	Packaging	Selective disclosure; no proof	Yes
	12	Carbon neutral Evian Water	Lawsuit	Label	Empty claims, no proof; misleading symbols	Yes
	13	Over use of plastics	Lawsuit	Packaging	Corporate responsibility in action	Non-conclusive
Decathlon	14	Ecodesign	Complaint	Label	Selective disclosure; dubious certifications & labels	Yes
EDF	15	Green bonds for nuclear energy	Complaint	Brand promise	Corporate responsibility in action; political spin	Non-conclusive
FDJ	16	Mission Nature	Complaint	Product	Misleading symbols	Yes
Groupe BPCE	17	Supporting green growth in our territories	Complaint	Brand promise	Corporate responsibility in action	Yes
Le Coq Sportif	18	Naturally innovative	Complaint	Product	Vagueness	Yes
LVMH	19	Louis Vuitton and Greenwashing fairy tales	Complaint	Product	Corporate responsibility in action	Non-conclusive
	20	Gain original	Lawsuit	Product	Misleading symbols	Non-conclusive
P&G	21	Nature fusion	Lawsuit	Label	Subjective discourse; dubious certifications & labels; no proof; misleading symbols	Yes
Samsung	22	Low transparency, very low integrity	Complaint	Business performance	Corporate responsibility in action	Non-conclusive
Toyota	23	One of nature's true spectacles	Complaint	Advertising campaign	Misleading symbols	Non-conclusive
	24	Misleading advertising Washington	Complaint	Business policy	Corporate responsibility in action	Non-conclusive
	25	Misleading advertising Australia	Lawsuit	Business policy	Corporate responsibility in action	Non-conclusive

Source: Produced by the authors

Of the 8 lawsuits presented, from a marketing/communication approach we can confirm that obvious greenwashing practices were being carried out in 5 of these cases, representing 62.5% of these lawsuits. Of the 14 registered complaints, we conclude that from a communication perspective there are greenwashing practices in 7 of them, representing 50% of cases. This analysis reveals that there is more evidence of greenwashing in lawsuits than in simple complaints. We should say that Toyota faced two lawsuits that we could not conclusively catalogue, as they did not refer to an advertising campaign or a specific marketing action, but rather to the company's global communication policy.

It is important to highlight that both Coca-Cola and Danone were the sponsors that presented the most alleged cases of greenwashing in 2023, with a total of 5 and 3 cases respectively. Our analysis allowed us to confirm the existence of evident greenwashing practices in all the Coca-Cola cases and in 2 of 3 Danone cases. Likewise, in the case of Air France - KLM Group, with one complaint and one lawsuit filed, we confirm the presence of greenwashing in both cases. In contrast, despite the complaints levelled at ArcelorMittal, we were unable to state or conclude that such practices are taking place, as the implications of their XCarb brand, which is actually a copyrighted trademark they have registered themselves, are listed; we understand that they wish to draw attention to the sustainability of their steel but, in accordance with the criteria of Nemes et al. (2022) we cannot reliably conclude that this is greenwashing, due to its dimensions.

After analysing the 22 cases of greenwashing complaints and lawsuits filed in 2023 against the sponsors of the Paris 2024 Olympic Games, we found that a considerable 54.5% of these cases denoted the existence of greenwashing. The analysis revealed a prevalence of greenwashing practices in lawsuits compared to complaints, with a proportion of 62.5% and 50%, respectively. In general, this study highlights the prevalence of greenwashing among Olympic Games sponsors and underscores the need for greater scrutiny of companies' communication practices.

It is important to note that, in 9 out of the 22 cases analysed, the results were classified as "inconclusive" or identified with "no proof." These classifications emerged primarily due to the lack of accessible, verifiable information or the ambiguity of the environmental claims made by the companies. In several instances, the material analysed—such as vague product labels or generalized marketing language—did not provide sufficient evidence to clearly identify a deceptive greenwashing practice, as outlined in the framework by Nemes et al. (2022).

This raises important questions about transparency and the availability of environmental data for public scrutiny. For example, in the case of ArcelorMittal's "Virtually Green" claim or CMA CMG's "Clean fuel," the companies used broad or proprietary terms whose environmental performance could not be verified through open sources. Similarly, several packaging claims (as in the case of P&G or Toyota) included symbols or phrases that lack third-party certification or public documentation to support them.

These inconclusive cases highlight the difficulty in holding companies accountable when transparency is limited or when legal standards for proof are not met. In this sense, an important line of future work could involve the development of methodologies for longitudinal monitoring of such companies, observing whether their environmental communication evolves over time or whether additional evidence becomes available. Tracking recurring patterns in ambiguous or unverifiable claims might help to detect early signs of potential greenwashing and foster more robust regulatory frameworks.

3.2. Results: Legal analysis

After the legal analysis of the complaints and lawsuits filed, we decided to focus on 8 lawsuits, 4 of which were filed in the United States, 3 in the European Union and 1 in Australia. All of them are in an initial phase of the procedure, waiting for the court to declare its jurisdiction or start determining the liability of the companies for fraudulent commercial practices.

In all the cases analysed, legal actions are brought by associations that protect the environment, individual consumers and/or consumer associations. In them, the actors state that companies have fraudulently resorted to claims of sustainability and commitment to the environment, to images of natures or images that are false, confusing and misleading, and that mislead the final consumer, who opts for products that respect the environment and rewards companies with better environmental performance.

companies fraudulently resort to claims of sustainability and commitment to the environment, to images of natures or images that are false, confusing and misleading, and that mislead the final consumer, who opts for products that respect the environment. What is being demanded is the immediate cessation of the sale of mislabelled items contrary to that set out by Law, as well as prohibiting continuing to label and sell items in this way; in some cases, it is demanded that companies adopt genuinely environmentally-friendly measures and strategies and finally, in some cases, that they pay compensation for damages.

4. Conclusions

Comprehensive analysis of greenwashing complaints and lawsuits filed in 2023 against the sponsors of the Paris 2024 Olympic Games has shed light on the prevalence and complexity of the greenwashing phenomenon in the sustainability promises of these corporate entities. The existence of greenwashing, identified in a significant percentage of cases, points to a worrying discrepancy between the theory and practice of sustainability in these sponsors. This study showed that rather than reflecting a true ecological commitment, a large part of the sponsors' supposed sustainability initiatives translate into marketing and communication strategies that seek to create a positive environmental image without sufficient support in underlying practices.

This research critically highlights the prevalence of greenwashing among the sponsors of the iconic global event that is the Olympic Games. In 2024 the commitment to sustainability is set out as one of its main commitments, which highlights the urgent need for greater scrutiny and regulation in corporate communication around sustainability. The findings also highlight the importance of promoting greater transparency and accountability, to ensure that companies go beyond mere superficial representations and adopt genuinely sustainable practices.

As this study has revealed, greenwashing is a significant obstacle on the path to true corporate environmental responsibility. It is essential that both consumers and regulators remain critical and attentive to companies' sustainability claims. Only then can we move forward from perpetuating the gap between promises and actual practices towards a future in which sustainability is not simply a marketing claim, but a comprehensive and honest business practice.

This study reveals the ethical and legal imperative to address the phenomenon of greenwashing among organisations that sponsor iconic global events. The evident discrepancy between the sustainability promises made by these organisations and their current practices magnifies the importance of a more strict and more defined ethical and legal interpretation of what truly constitutes sustainability in the discourse.

From an ethical perspective, sponsoring companies have a responsibility to ensure that their sustainability claims accurately reflect their actual practices and policies. It is not enough to offer sustainability initiatives as a marketing tactic or to improve their brand image. Instead, companies must incorporate sustainable practices at all operational levels and maintain complete and constant transparency about their efforts and achievements. From there, all necessary communication and marketing efforts certainly can be made.

In the legal field, this study highlights the need for a comprehensive regulatory framework that is being negotiated in Europe, guaranteeing the veracity of companies' sustainability claims and sanctioning greenwashing practices. The prevalence of greenwashing in lawsuits indicates that there is room for greater legal intervention to protect the rights and interests of stakeholders, including consumers, the environment and society at large.

To move beyond superficial representations and ensure truly sustainable corporate behavior, future research could focus on developing measurable standards for sustainability communication, as well as exploring enforcement mechanisms that promote greater transparency and accountability. Investigating how regulatory pressure, third-party

certifications, and stakeholder activism shape corporate behavior could provide practical pathways to reduce greenwashing. Such research would help translate normative claims into actionable strategies for both policy makers and industry leaders.

Several lines of future research should be explored given the extent of greenwashing and its influence on the perception of companies' commitment to sustainability. Some possible areas for future research could include:

1. **The impact of greenwashing on consumer perception:** Exploring the effect of greenwashing on the behaviour and attitudes of consumers and their trust of brands can provide valuable insights to build a more conscious and critical society.
2. **Intersectoral comparison of greenwashing:** Comparing different sectors can allow us to discover specific sectoral trends and understand how greenwashing is manifested in different industries.
3. **Examination of existing regulations and legislation on greenwashing:** Investigating the existing legal frameworks and regulations in different parts of the world can help identify key areas for improvement and contribute to forming more effective policies to combat greenwashing, as this phenomenon has a planetary dimension.
4. **Longitudinal greenwashing studies:** Long-term monitoring of companies accused of greenwashing can provide a clearer understanding of how greenwashing practices evolve over time and whether regulatory and compliance efforts have any effect on the prevalence of this phenomenon.

These future lines of research can deepen our understanding of greenwashing and help formulate effective strategies to mitigate this problem and promote a more genuine and meaningful commitment to sustainability.

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