

Programme: Master of Business Administration

Module: Dissertation (LCMB7035)

Proposed Dissertation Topic: Sustainability Trends, Greenwashing
Practices and Consumer Responses in the Food Industry: A
Systematic Review

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Word Count: 2289

Submission Date: 18th February 2026

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1. Introduction

1.1 Research Background and Problem Context

The concept of sustainability has been developed into a core strategic focus of the food industry in response to environmental pressures, regulatory questioning, and increasing consumer demands for ethical production. The use of sustainability-related claims, labels, and certifications is a growing trend in food companies as a way of signalling responsible practices to differentiate products in competitive markets (Asioli *et al.*, 2020). Nevertheless, the high rate of such claim growth has also presented the issue of greenwashing, which is considered the selective, misleading, or exaggerated reporting of environmental performance. According to recent reviews, the concept of greenwashing is still prevalent and conceptually inadequate, making it unclear to both companies and customers (Huang *et al.*, 2024).

Sustainability communication is not always effective as far as the consumer is concerned. Although a credible claim can increase trust and readiness to pay, messages that are under-supported or over-promotional do facilitate the attitude of scepticism and unintended adverse responses, such as lower purchase intentions and avoidance of brands (Acuti *et al.*, 2022). Empirical studies also reveal that consumer reactions to sustainability labels and claims are highly heterogeneous, and their impacts differ based on the product category, claim type, and context signals, and implicating sustainability signals do not consistently affect different markets (Andreani *et al.*, 2025).

Consequently, the food industry experiences a serious issue: both sustainability initiatives and sustainability communications aimed at establishing legitimacy can be counterproductive to gain consumer trust when treated as inauthentic. However, the available literature tends to focus on these problems individually.

1.2 Aim of the Study

This study aims to systematically examine and integrate existing literature on sustainability trends and greenwashing practices within the food industry and their impact on consumer decision-making.

1.3 Research Question

- What are the key sustainability trends and practices currently adopted within the food industry?
- How is greenwashing manifested in sustainability-related claims and communications within the food industry?
- How do sustainability initiatives and greenwashing practices influence consumer perceptions, trust, and decision-making in the food industry?

1.4 Research Objectives

- To identify and synthesise the key sustainability trends and practices currently adopted within the food industry as reported in recent empirical and review-based literature.
- To examine the forms and characteristics of greenwashing in sustainability-related claims and communications within the food industry, with particular attention to how such practices are conceptualised and identified across studies.
- To analyse the influence of sustainability initiatives and greenwashing practices on consumer perceptions, trust, and decision-making, drawing together evidence on behavioural outcomes such as scepticism, purchase intention, and willingness to pay.

1.5 Rationale and Significance of the Study

The increasing interest in sustainability in the food industry has produced a body of research related to corporate practices, communication strategies, and consumer responses, which is still vast, yet scattered. The available reviews usually emphasise single dimensions, including green marketing practices or sustainability disclosure and fail to combine these factors in influencing consumer decision-making (Deshmukh and Tare, 2024). Besides, the scholarly literature reveals that there are always issues with the separation of true sustainability efforts and greenwashing, especially in the context of the intricate agri-food supply chains, which complicates the formation of consumer trust (Cherono *et al.*, 2025). There are also doubts about whether sustainability certifications can be effective and credible in reducing the perception of greenwashing (Nygaard, 2023).

The study is thus important as it presents a systematic and integrative synthesis of sustainability trends and greenwashing practices in the food industry with particular emphasis on consumer perceptions and behavioural outcomes. Through the synthesis of scattered evidence, the review will provide a better theoretical understanding and policy recommendations to researchers, policymakers, and industry stakeholders.

2. Literature Review

2.1 Theoretical Framework

A set of complementary theoretical models can be used to explain the relationship between sustainability practices, greenwashing and consumer decision-making in the food industry. The signalling theory (Spence, 1973) offers a conceptual framework through the idea of the sustainability labels, certifications, and disclosures as market signals aiming at the minimisation of the information asymmetry between firms and consumers. Nevertheless, in case of the ambiguity or the lack of consistency of such signals, they can lose credibility and add to a greenwashing perception instead of trustworthiness (Asioli et al., 2020).

The trust theory, particularly the integrative model of organisational trust (Mayer, Davis, & Schoorman, 1995), also describes how consumers assess the plausibility of sustainability claims and the mediating role of trust in the relationship between reported sustainability and behavioural consequences. Food sustainability certification reviews show that trust depends on the transparency, enforcement, and perceived independence of certifying bodies, but not the existence of labels (Nygaard, 2023). In situations where trust has been compromised, sustainability assertions might not have any effect on purchase decisions.

Attribution theory (Kelley, 1973) is applicable to explain the way consumers deduce the motives of firms that are either negative or adverse. Consumers can assume that sustainability activities are seen as self-serving or opportunistic, which leads to a perceived lack of sincerity, attracting a backfiring response (Acuti et al., 2022).

The Elaboration Likelihood Model (ELM) assists in understanding the differences in information processing, where consumers can use heuristic clues like labels or symbols when there is low involvement, and conduct greater evaluation of the disclosures when there are higher involvement conditions (Rondoni and Grasso, 2021). Collectively, the models offer a combined model of understanding sustainability communication and consumer reactions in the food industry.

2.2 Synthesis of Empirical Evidence on Consumer Responses

Empirical studies continuously acknowledge that sustainability initiatives may affect consumer decision-making positively, but the extent and orientation of impacts differ significantly. Food labelling review studies point towards environmental and social labels to augment consumer knowledge and readiness to pay, particularly when coupled with transparent and standardised information types (Tobi *et al.*, 2019). Correspondingly, carbon footprint labels have been discovered to reinforce environmentally oriented decisions, but their utilisation is limited by low levels of consumer familiarity and cognitive load (Randoni and Grasso, 2021).

The evidence provided by meta-analyses and reviews also proves that there is a significant level of heterogeneity in consumer readiness to spend on sustainability statements. Recent meta-regression results indicate that sustainability labelling does not produce the same effect on products, different types of claims, or in different study settings, and the positive effects are by no means universal (Andreani *et al.*, 2025). This non-homogeneity is consistent with the larger evidence on the topic of green purchase behaviour that trust and perceived authenticity are mediating factors in the connection between sustainability information and behavioural intentions (Wijekoon and Sabri, 2021).

An increasing body of literature reveals unplanned adverse effects of sustainability communication. Consumer behaviour reviews also show that exaggerated or unproven sustainability claims have the potential to cause scepticism, perceived manipulation, and negative brand assessment, which has sometimes been termed sustainability backfiring (Acuti *et al.*, 2022). This is especially germane in the food sector, where consumers encounter an ever-increasing number of competing claims on packaging, advertising, or in digital media.

2.3 Greenwashing, Trust, and Information Credibility

The concept of trust should be noted as one of the key constructs that are used in the literature to connect sustainability practices, greenwashing, and consumer decision-making. The findings of systematic reviews on sustainability information disclosure in the agri-food sector show that transparency and consistency are the main determinants of credibility, but the process of disclosure is not even and is often tactical but not substantive (Muriel *et al.*, 2025). Issues of the credibility of sustainability certifications also make this situation more difficult. It has been indicated that although the perceived greenwashing can be minimised with certifications, it is the quality of governance, the enforcement processes, and consumer awareness that are likely to make it worse (Nygaard, 2023).

The secondary sources released recently also emphasise the increasing role of communication channels in developing trust. Bibliometric records indicate that social media now represents a stage where sustainability messages are being actively targeted in the food industry and that genuine sustainability discourses are being reinforced and false assertions propagated (Coman *et al.*, 2025). The rapid pace and global scale of digital channels make the risk even greater that the practices of greenwashing would spread quickly and, therefore, decrease the consumer trust not of certain specific brands but of sustainability-related statements in general.

In addition to firm-consumer relationships, stakeholder-oriented reviews also point to the fact that the perception of corporate social responsibility by actors in the sustainable food systems is diverse, with consumers more likely to assess claims of sustainability in a moral and relational manner than on pure informational grounds (Zhang and Bustami, 2026). These results support the opinion that consumer reactions towards sustainability and greenwashing are entrenched in intricate social and institutional settings.

2.4 Identification of the Research Gap

Although there is an increasing amount of reviews on sustainability, greenwashing and consumer behaviour, the literature can be considered to be still fragmented. The available literature is inclined to investigate one specific aspect, e.g., the effectiveness of labelling, determinants of green purchases, or disclosure, but fails to combine the impact of sustainability trends and greenwashing on consumer trust and choice in the food industry (Deshmukh and Tare, 2024). Additionally, most of the reviews take either a consumer-focused or a supply-chain approach, and they do not provide much synthesis between levels of analysis. As a result, the literature does not find a unifying systematic review that can collect sustainability practices, manifestations of greenwashing and consumer reaction in one analytical framework. This gap is critical in correcting conflicting outcomes and extends theoretical insights and practical recommendations in the food sustainability field.

3. Research Methodology

This study will employ a systematic literature review to identify, evaluate, and synthesise peer-reviewed research on sustainability trends and greenwashing practices in the food industry and their effects on consumer decision-making. A systematic approach is appropriate for integrating fragmented evidence and producing a transparent, reproducible synthesis of complex research fields (Gough, Oliver and Thomas, 2017). The review will focus on studies published between 2016 and 2025 to capture contemporary developments in sustainability communication and consumer responses.

Relevant studies will be identified through structured searches of selected academic databases, guided by predefined keywords and Boolean operators to ensure comprehensive and replicable coverage (Gusenbauer and Gauster, 2024). Clear inclusion and exclusion criteria will be applied, restricting the review to English-language, peer-reviewed studies examining sustainability claims, greenwashing, or consumer decision-making within food or agri-food contexts. Study selection will follow a staged screening process, including title and abstract screening followed by full-text assessment, to enhance methodological transparency (Page *et al.*, 2021).

All included studies will undergo quality appraisal to assess methodological robustness and relevance, with data systematically extracted for comparison (Afifi, Stryhn and Sánchez, 2023). Findings will be integrated using qualitative narrative synthesis, enabling comparison of themes, concepts, and reported outcomes rather than statistical aggregation. Ethical standards will be upheld throughout in line with UWTSD research ethics guidelines, ensuring accurate referencing and faithful representation of original work (UWTSD, 2022).

4. Study Scope and Feasibility

The paper will concentrate on peer-reviewed articles that discuss the trends in sustainability, greenwashing, and consumer reactions in the food and agri-food sector. Empirical and review-based studies published in the English language from 2016 to 2025 are restricted to make it relevant to the current sustainability dialogue and changing consumer requirements. By focusing on this period, the review would be able to include more recent trends in sustainability labelling, disclosure, and communication practices that affect consumer trust and behaviour (Muriel *et al.*, 2025). The research can be carried out within the context of postgraduate research because of the presence of a large amount of high-quality literature and the introduction of a systematic review methodology, which would allow for collecting different findings efficiently without having to collect primary data.

5. Research Risks and Mitigation Strategies

The research has little ethical and safety concern as it is based on secondary data only. Nevertheless, there are a number of methodological threats, especially due to the fact that the review will be performed by only one researcher. Selection biasing may also occur in study identification and screening, but it will be prevented with the help of well-constructed search strategies, databases, and clear inclusion and exclusion criteria (Cheong *et al.*, 2023). It is also possible that the single-researcher method will introduce a possibility of interpretation bias when extracting and synthesizing the data; this will be mitigated by systematically recording the decisions made and following the accepted systematic review methods (Hanna *et al.*, 2024). Also, inconsistency might arise due to dissimilarities in the definitions of such crucial concepts as sustainability and greenwashing used in the various studies, so standard operational definitions will be used and any differences will be reported.

6. Proposed Research Timeline

Activities / Timeline	18/02/2026 to 06/05/2026				
	Week 1	Week 6	Week 9	Week 12	Week 16
Development of the research plan and acquisition of ethical clearance					
Comprehensive systematic review of the literature and study screening					
Data extraction, critical quality appraisal, and analytical procedures					
Drafting, revising, and finalising the dissertation					
Submission of the completed dissertation					

7. Conclusion

The concepts of sustainability and greenwashing have now become the focus and the contentious topics of the modern food industry, and their impact on consumer trust and decision-making is critical. Sustainability programs and communications that are designed to encourage responsible consumption fail most of the time because of their inconsistency in practices and the perception of greenwashing. Available literature offers useful albeit incomplete ideas about these dynamics. The study will help illuminate the relationship between sustainability trends and greenwashing practices and their joint impact on consumer perceptions and behavioural outcomes by undertaking a systematic review and combining existing research. This analysis thus provides a systematic platform on which to build future scholarly knowledge and further justifiable and useful sustainability policies in the food industry.

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