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## Green Consumerism vs. Greenwashing

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**Abstract:**

**Purpose:** The aim of the article is to diagnose knowledge about greenwashing and consumer attitudes towards this phenomenon on selected markets of European organic food products. The main principle of greenwashing is the attempt to give the impression that the company is doing more for the environment than it actually does. The article discusses the characteristics of greenwashing and also examines the level of awareness among young consumers about the knowledge of this type of practices on the organic food market.

**Approach/Methodology/Design:** The subjects of the research are young people, aged 12-35, from two European countries: Poland and Turkey. The research material was collected by direct interview method using a questionnaire, which contained 15 closed questions and 5 survey questions. The selection of the sample was deliberately random.

**Findings.** Demographic characteristics such as sex, education or other descriptions of consumers as net monthly income, place of residence do not change the knowledge about greenwashing.

**Practical Implications:** Greenwashing is a barrier to economic development in a sustainable way, because it contributes to the increase of skepticism among consumers towards pro-environmental initiatives. Greenwashing companies use resources that could be used in an environmentally friendly way.

**Originality/Value:** It cannot be ruled out that the results obtained may also affect other groups of consumers and other markets.

**Keywords:** Greenwashing, green consumerism, social corporate responsibility, social consumer responsibility, rural areas.

**JEL:** M14, M31, D18, D91, Q01.

**Paper Type:** Research article

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## 1. Introduction

During the last decade, the market (especially consumers) has become more aware of environmental issues. They have been used especially by large corporations shaping their activities within the framework of ecological marketing. Ecological marketing covers a wide range of activities, including product modification, changes in the production process, changes in packaging, as well as modification of advertisements. One of the negative effects of these adaptation changes is greenwashing. The phenomenon called Greenwashing is defined in marketing as the dissemination of disinformation (Horiuchi and Schuchard, 2009). It is used by business to convince consumers that the organization is socially responsible in terms of the environment (Lippert, 2011). Greenwashing activities use information asymmetry and misleading buyers (Jakubczak and Gotowska, 2018). The problem of greenwashing appears more and more often in various markets, and research on this subject is relatively small. A particular consideration should be given to consumers' reaction, who this action is aimed at, and who should know its mechanism to effectively defend.

Green consumerism is now becoming quite popular and important as a research problem for three reasons. First of all, consumer decisions have a major impact on the natural environment, especially on rural areas and therefore can contribute to improving its condition. Secondly, the issues of lifestyles, including green consumption, are increasingly being made public to reach the consciousness of many people. Thirdly, in the appropriate shaping of consumption, one sees the opportunities and ways to effectively regulate environmental problems that have already been exhausted elsewhere (Cohen and Murphy, 2001). In view of the above facts, it can be used to say that consumers are an important link in sustainable development.

The results of scientific research indicate that the phenomenon of disinformation of consumers, violates their bargaining position on the markets and leads to wrong, resulting from unawareness, consumer behavior. This is the reason why it would be necessary to present the greenwashing mechanism to the consumers and enable them to develop ways to avoid falling into the trap (Jakubczak, 2018).

So far, there have not been many studies on the issue of corporate social responsibility. The research usually concerns declarations and opinions. It is difficult to study specific people's behavior. The team headed by R. Karaszewski developed the concept of objective measurement of consumer social responsibility (Dudziński *et al.*, 2013). which uses the analysis of the structure of municipal waste. This method makes it possible to assess post factum the behavior divided into certain social groups, e.g. in terms of place of residence. However, it does not make it possible to learn the behavior of consumers, e.g., defined due to other demographic characteristics such as age or sex.

For this reason, the most frequently used interview method, with the use of a questionnaire survey, was chosen to study the opinions of young consumers, which despite its limitations (allows to determine only opinions on a given topic) is the most advantageous due to the cost and the ease of conducting research and the analysis of the results.

The aim of the article is to diagnose knowledge about greenwashing and consumer attitudes towards this phenomenon on selected markets of European organic food products. The subjects of the research are young people, aged 12-35, from two European countries: Poland and Turkey, they come from small and bigger cities and rural areas. The subject of the research is consumer knowledge and opinions and their attitude towards the subject under study.

The following research tasks have been determined in the work:

1. Determining the scope and manifestations of greenwashing on the organic food market based on a literature review (Cohen and Murphy, 2001).
2. Analysis of the level of knowledge of respondents about greenwashing.
3. Analysis of opinions and attitudes towards decisions made on the organic food market in the context of greenwashing.

The research material was collected by direct interview method using a questionnaire, which contained 15 closed questions and 5 survey questions. The selection of the sample was deliberately random. The selection criterion was: country, age. The survey was voluntary and anonymous. In total, 375 people were examined.

Empirical data were analyzed using the classification trees method available in the Statistica 13.1 program, which made it possible to find links between variables. Part of the calculations were made in an Excel spreadsheet. To achieve the goal, methods were used to determine the statistical significance of data of a nominal nature: Chi-square independence test. After collecting the data and checking their completeness and suitability for the analysis using a non-parametric method of classification trees, dependent and independent variables were determined. Variables are collected in Table 1. The dependent variables were marked with Xn and the independent variables Zn.

**Table 1.** Variables analyzed by the classification trees method

Dependent variables	
X1	1. Are you familiar with the concept of greenwashing?
X3	3. Do you think that advertising promotes healthy food always contain real information?
X4	4. Please indicate the degree of complimance with your opinion about that quality of organic products advertising is very good
X5	5. Do you thing that advertising marked is green is advertising of organic product?

X6	6. How often do you buy organic products?
X7	7. How much do you dedicate a month for shopping for organic products?
X9	9. How often do I check whether the purchased products organic?
X12	12. Do you think that the product bearing the words health food is an ecological product?
X10	10. Do you pay attention to ecological marks on the packaging of the product while making purchases?
X13	13. How would you rate your environmental awareness?
Independent variables	
Z1	Sex
Z2	Education
Z4	Place of residence
Z5	Net monthly income (on hand) per householdmember
Z6	Country

*Source: Own study based on research results.*

## 2. Greenwashing – the Definition and Operations

There is no one consistent definition of greenwashing established so far in the literature on the subject, however, studies conducted in this area have made it possible to identify some distinctive features for this practice. First of all, companies using greenwashing do it because they want to improve their image (Delamas and Burbano, 2011). In this way, they strive to win over consumers and other stakeholders by gaining the image of an environmentally friendly or ecological company. The effect of this type of activity is the increase of acceptance in the organization's surroundings, eg among clients, potential employees, investors or contractors (Bowen and Aragon-Correa, 2014). Secondly, the created image of a company wishing to be ecologically friendly in its operations does not always go hand in hand with its actual impact on the environment. This is because companies intentionally introduce confusion (Lyon and Maxwell, 2011).

Thirdly, target groups often have difficulty verifying the information provided by these companies in a substantive manner. The information from companies about their activities is limited, incomplete and even subliminal (Chen and Chang, 2013). Typical greenwashing strategies are shown in Figure 1. They refer to two levels: enterprises - presenting environmental practices and product - presenting environmental benefits resulting from the characteristics of a product or service (TerraChoice Group, 2010).

Fourthly, greenwashing is characterized by the fact that the company suggests its resource efficiency, although this is not reflected in real activities. The fifth feature of greenwashing is the broadcasting of information to the environment about alleged activities that refer to known and widely discussed in public space problems related to the protection of the environment, eg CO<sub>2</sub> emissions, while concealing or omitting information in activities where the company contributes to the deterioration of the condition of the environment (Polonsky, 2010).

**Figure 1. Examples of greenwashing activities**

<b>Hiding the conflict of objectives</b>	• Providing information on one friendly measure for the environment while other activities are not environmentally friendly
<b>Lack of evidence</b>	• Information on environmentally friendly activities is not supported by scientific research
<b>Abstract, unclear statements</b>	• Intentional use of abstract language, so it can be interpreted easily as environmentally friendly, eg green, eco, environmentally friendly, etc.
<b>Wrong labels and slogans</b>	• Invented labels to authenticate the operation as environmentally friendly
<b>Graphic elements</b>	• Projects using colors, symbols, photos of eg plants, greenery, suggesting environmentally friendly activities

**Source:** Own study based on: K.M. Griese, K. Werner, J. Hogg, 2017. *Avoiding Greenwashing in Event Marketing: An Exploration of Concepts, Literature and Methods, Journal of Management and Sustainability, Vol. 7, No. 4, p. 4.*

The TerraChoice group distinguishes seven elements that make up the practices of greenwashing companies: a hidden compromise - that is, suggesting that a product, action or event is green based on unjustifiable features; lie - false environmental judgments; without proof; indeterminacy; insignificance; minimizing wrongdoing and false labels (TerraChoice, 2010).

### 3. Greenwashing in the Opinion of Young Consumers of Organic Products

#### 3.1 Social Responsibility of Consumers

The number of available definitions of consumer social responsibility in domestic and foreign literature is limited. According to T.M. Devinney, the author of consumer behavior research, consumer social responsibility is reflected in its deliberate market choices and the acquisition of those products and services that have been produced by socially responsible organizations (Devinneyet, 2006; Cyfert and Hoppe, 2011; Hoppe, 2013; Karaszewski *et al.*, 2011). Lewicka-Strzałecka (2002) adds a dynamic approach to consumer social responsibility. The consumer may feel responsible before and after the choice. In this way, positive and negative responsibility can be distinguished. Positive consumer responsibility means that he / she demonstrates at every stage of making decisions a conscious desire to exert positive influence on themselves, organizations, social or environmental surroundings. The negative responsibility lies in assuming responsibility after making a choice, i.e. after purchasing a product that directly or indirectly causes a negative impact in the above-mentioned areas. The consumer can then behave in a

responsible way in the future, but it is less certain than in the case of the positive consumer (Gotowska, Jakubczak, and Kufel, 2013). It happens that responsible consumers stop only at issuing responsible opinions, but do not put them into action (Lewicka-Strzańska, 2002).

Social responsibility of consumers is an important issue in a direct way to the effectiveness of socially responsible practices introduced more and more often by business (Thomas and Maxwell, 2008). The area of ethical consumption is a relatively unknown problem (Devinney, 2010). Consumers have difficulty maintaining responsibility in the consumption process (Eckhardt, Belk and Devinney, 2010). It is anticipated that consumers will develop ethical behavior in the market in ever-lasting habits over the next 20 years (Devinney, Auger and Eckhardt, 2011). The quality of behavior and attitudes of responsible people exhibited by consumers also affect the possibility of socio-economic development in a sustainable way. Researchers dealing with the level and quality of life and sustainable development postulate that the only way to balance development is to reduce consumption (Kolodko, 2013) which today exceeds the state of basic needs of many groups of people and wastes valuable resources (especially in highly developed countries). We spend our income on shopping more and more often to match others or show our superiority (Ostrowski, 2012). Through our consumption, we determine who we are (Maciejewski, 2005) how we would like to be perceived (Onion and Perchla-Włosik, 2014). Such consumption depletes the supplies necessary for next generations to survive (Blecker and Esquivel, 2016).

### **3.2 Green Consumerism**

The market for organic products is growing in Europe and in Poland, according to the data from the Research Institute for Organic Agriculture. Consumers appreciate this type of products for their taste and health. Their production is combined with reduced use of artificial fertilizers, reduction of greenhouse gas emissions. The organic production system favors the development of local producers also through diversification of activities in rural areas, creation of jobs, guarantees a more humane treatment of farm animals (Wasilik, 2014; Klepacki, 1990; Adamowicz and Zwolińska-Ligaj, 2009; Adamowicz, 2005; Koreleska, 2018).

The research results show that consumers, when buying organic products, are guided by the criteria related to environmental protection. Numerous food scandals have contributed to the fact that natural products are eagerly chosen. The growing demand for eco-products is associated with deeper changes in the modern consumption model. The current trend can be called green consumerism. This trend can be characterized as consumer behavior aimed at preserving the possibility of consumption by future generations, it manifests itself in avoiding products that are dangerous to the health of the consumer and its environment and that cause damage to the environment through the production process, the use and in post-consumer phase, and also consuming a disproportionate amount of resources, whether they

contribute to unnecessary waste, for example by generous packaging, excess features or too short shelf-life (Witek, 2014; Koreleska and Zikeli, 2017).

The disposition of the Commission of the European Community clearly indicates that food can be labeled as organic when at least 95% of ingredients of agricultural origin are produced in an ecological way. One of the basic assumptions of organic farming is elimination of artificial fertilizers, synthetic pesticides, additives from the use, as well as improvers and preservatives (Gadomska *et al.*, 2014).

### **3.3 Ecological Business Responsibility**

The ecological responsibility of enterprises falls within the scope of corporate social responsibility (CSR) (PN-ISO 26000, 2012). Together with the social responsibility of consumers and the social responsibility of the state, it is a complicated arrangement conditioning sustainable economic and social development (Hoppe, 2013).

Resource management is currently taking place in a globalizing environment whose main paradigm is sustainable development (Rudawska *et al.*, 2016). The concept of sustainable development requires from business entities such activities that they meet not only their needs and expectations of their current clients, society, but also take into account the needs of future generations (Dąbrowska and Gutkowska, 2015). An increasing number of enterprises are deciding to take up the challenge of social responsibility. The reasons for this decision vary, for example, the requirements of contractors, the search for new strategies to compete on an increasingly homogeneous market or the desire to win new customers.

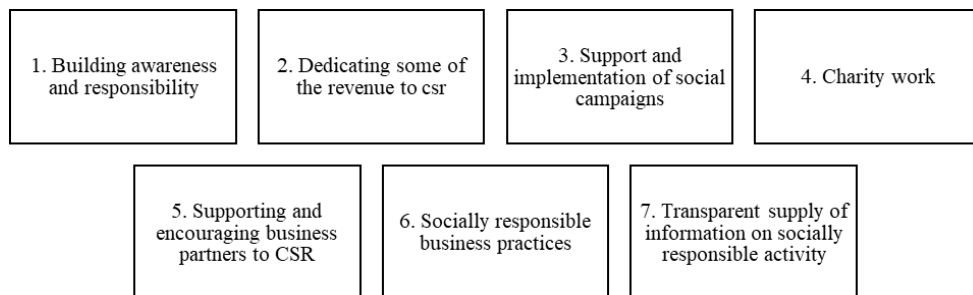
Corporate social responsibility is the responsibility for sustainable development undertaken by the company. The concept of sustainable development dates back to the 1980s and is often understood as a commitment to simultaneously engage in the following three areas: economic growth, environmental sustainability and social progress (Rudawska *et al.*, 2016).

CSR has been defined in various ways in literature. According to Bowen (1953), social responsibility refers to the commitment made by a business organization to implement these policies, to take these decisions or to follow these directions of action, which are in line with the goals and values of society. Carroll (1979) adds that corporate social responsibility covers the economic, legal and ethical expectations of society towards the organization in a given period. This approach covers the entire scope of the company's responsibilities. Therefore, companies must take into account the quality of management (eg processes). The organization should define its role in society and implement the necessary ethical, responsible, legal and social standards. Therefore, the organization is obliged to take into account the interests of clients, employees, shareholders, communities and ecological considerations in all aspects of its operations (Mohamed and Dineshwar, 2015).

Corporate social responsibility, in accordance with the ISO 26000 standard, which is an international standard that sets guidelines in this area, means that the organization assumes responsibility for the impact of all its decisions and actions on society and the environment. In practice, organizations try to operate in a transparent and ethical way, taking into account the needs and expectations of their stakeholders: employees, contractors, the local community and the natural environment. CSR is about how companies manage business activities to make a positive impact on society (PN-ISO 26000, 2012).

Kotler and Lee (2005) identify six main areas of taking initiatives that positively influence the company acting as a socially responsible company. First, organizations provide funds, in-kind contributions or other organizational resources to build awareness and care for social issues in their environment, or support fundraising, participation or recruitment of volunteers to solve social problems. Secondly, organizations commit to transfer a certain percentage of revenues to specific issues important to society. Thirdly, organizations support the development and implementation of social campaigns that are to trigger changes in people's behavior, eg to improve health, safety, the environment or social well-being. Fourth, business organizations directly contribute to charitable activities in the form of cash donations. Fifth, corporations support and encourage retail partners or franchise members to voluntarily devote time to support local social organizations and their social activities. Finally, businesses adopt and conduct socially responsible business practices that support solving social problems, aiming at improving the well-being of the community and protecting the environment (Kotler and Lee, 2005). An additional activity within the social responsibility of the organization is transparent disclosure of information about CSR activities to interested parties (Holder-Webb *et al.*, 2009) (Figure 2):

**Figure 2.** Initiatives in the area of CSR



**Source:** Own study based on Kotler, Ph., Lee, N. (2005). *Corporate social responsibility: Doing the most good for your company and your cause. Best practices from Hewlett-Packard, Ben & Jerry's and other leading companies*, John Wiley & Sons, New Jersey.

Often, according to the observations carried out, products of a similar type that do not have certificates are placed next to BIO products. The study and the results obtained allow to notice that the sellers in the analyzed trade units do not take



responsibility for sold products in the area of reliable information to consumers. The most common disinformation activities in this case are the placement of BIO products, whether in unitary or bulk packaging, in different store locations in the company of a similar range of products simulating the appearance of BIO products. Another practice is the lack of a separate shelf for organic products. Both of these activities may be perceived as deliberate misleading to consumers.

Many producers of goods exhibited in the surveyed discount stores apply greenwashing strategies. The most often placed ones are graphic elements and packaging color suggesting health-oriented content, higher quality, naturalness. In this way, the producers make greater use of the lack of responsibility of the sellers for correct information to consumers.

Another example of undertakings aimed at convincing consumers to a company using greenwashing is the Honda campaign - Go green. The campaign is surprising and is based on letters sent to customers, but in this case correspondence contains plant seeds that are to help reduce the carbon dioxide content in the atmosphere. The consumer's task is to plant it on the letter paper made of 100% recyclable material. The question is, how far is the campaign an example of a fair company and will clients believe in such PR and marketing activities? One can be sure that it is rather an attempt to build a positive brand image on an alleged pro-ecological activity.

It follows from the above that consumers have a difficult situation in making purchase decisions on the part of both producers and traders. For this reason, to ensure their own wellbeing, they must make more effort when shopping to read the content on the packaging, or show greater concentration in recognizing the desired category of products by their labels (Jakubczak, 2018).

### **3.4 Characteristics of the Studied Group**

As consumers, the so-called Millennials (aged 18-35) stand out from previous generations with high awareness and willingness to share information about products. They expect information and commitment from producers, they want to build relationships with them. Some of them, more often than other groups of consumers, choose products whose producers support their important goal. They also express their willingness to cooperate in creating new products. What is important, this group is particularly affected by the inequality of consumption, because it violates the subjective feeling of dissatisfaction with unequal treatment in an extremely important for the young sphere. In the future, this may lead to social inequalities (OMG, 2014).

A representative research conducted among the Younger Millennials indicates that not many of them know the concept of CSR and that they rather associate it with marketing activities. Nevertheless, they believe that running a business in a responsible manner is a positive phenomenon in business and therefore affects the

image of the company and, for example, employer branding. They also demonstrate the need for information about CSR and companies operating in accordance with its principles. The most important criteria for purchasing choices on the market are still the price (80%) and product quality (77%). Only 16% of respondents consider features of products related to social responsibility (Cienniewski and Buszko, 2009).

375 people aged 18-35 were examined, of which 243 were from Turkey (65%). The average age for the studied population was about 25. Among people coming from Turkey, about 42% were women of middle age close to the entire population surveyed. The women from Poland constituted 62% among the representatives of this nationality and their average age was about 3 years lower than the entire population studied. The oldest group were men from Poland and from Turkey. Their average age differed in plus almost one year compared to the average of the examined population.

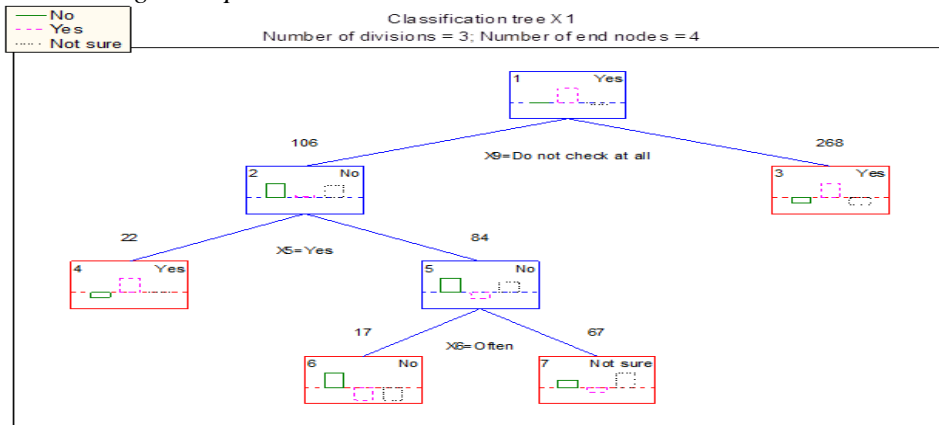
The largest number of respondents had income between 151 to 400 € per member of the household (170 people). The numbers in other income groups, above 400 € and below 151 €, were lower and, at the same time, similar to each other, respectively: 99 and 106 people. The largest number of respondents came from small towns (up to 100,000 inhabitants. there were 192 people. In the second place there were residents of large cities (over 100,000 residents) with a number of 102 people. The smallest number of respondents represented rural areas - 81 people.

### **3.5 Young Consumers of Eco-Food and Greenwashing**

After the procedure of assessing the importance of independent features as predictors for the X1 feature, it turned out that the Z6 feature is the most important one. In the course of further analysis, it was found that Polish research participants are not more sure of their knowledge regarding greenwashing in relation to respondents from Turkey. The application of the classification trees method allowed for further identification of the structure of independent features. It turned out that people who are less familiar with the concept of greenwashing usually do not trust ads that ensure the sale of healthy food. Some of these consumers also do not believe that the inscription healthy food provides a product with ecological origin of the contents of the package. The group of respondents, in which people expressing the opinion that they know the concept of greenwashing predominated, mostly declared that the green color used on the packaging informs about the organic product inside.

Those who declare ignorance of the concept of greenwashing do not check the inscriptions and markings on food packaging at all, and almost 3/4 of them do not trust that the green color on the packaging indicates the organic product inside. However, nearly 1/4 of these respondents say that despite having little knowledge about greenwashing, they trust that products marked with green color on the packaging are organic and do not check other information stored on the packaging.

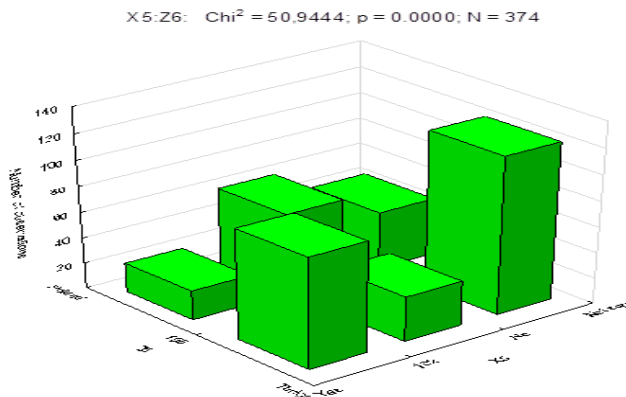
**Figure 3.** Characterization of grouping of respondents in terms of knowledge of the greenwashing concept



Source: Own calculations.

On the other hand, people declaring knowledge about greenwashing always check information on packaging, or at least from time to time. People uncertain about their knowledge of greenwashing and people who do not know that concept differ in the frequency of purchases of organic products. The more often these people make purchases, the more they are convinced of their ignorance regarding greenwashing. This applies to people who have a low level of knowledge on this subject and do not check the information on the packaging, do not trust that green always means an organic product (Figure 3). Differences were observed between the opinions of young consumers coming from Turkey and Poland about the presence of green color in advertisements of organic products. This dependence is statistically significant even at the level of 0.0005 (Figure 4):

**Figure 4.** Histogram of two variables Z6 relative to X5



Source: Own calculations.

Young Turks are divided into two groups of the highest number. One of these groups is convinced that the green color on the packaging means the organic product, and the other group is not sure about the meaning of the green color. In the case of Polish consumers, the largest group thinks that the green color on the packaging is not related to the organicity of the products. Only about 7% of respondents who indicated that the green color informs that the product is organic at the same time defined their knowledge of eco-consumer issues at the highest level and it was not related to the country of origin.

#### **4. Discussion**

The conducted research reveals that young consumers in Poland and Turkey are largely helpless against greenwashing practices on the market of organic products. Examples of business operations that are not properly recognized are the use of green color and special markings on organic food packaging. Similar results were obtained in testing by Krafft and Saito (2014). Firstly, it has been identified that consumers are not able to adequately identify messages from advertisements or PR projects. Secondly, consumers consider the brand to be more environmentally friendly if it is presented in green advertising than in environmentally neutral advertising. Thirdly, consumers are more likely to buy products advertised in the greenwashing trend.

Current research indicates that a group of consumers admitting to a low level of knowledge about the phenomenon of greenwashing indicates skepticism towards the use of green color on the packaging and inscriptions informing about healthy food. MacLachlan (2005) stated that consumers with high skepticism tend to ignore advertisements and look for information about products in other sources (Huang and Darmayanti, 2014).

In contrast to the results obtained by Paço and Reis (2012) which inform that green advertising is accepted by consumers with skepticism, research carried out for the article shows that it cannot be ruled out that green advertising can actually increase shopping intentions. However, the development of truly eco-friendly products may be hindered by the current consumer market, because greenwashing treatments are perceived as environmentally friendly, as the authors suggest (Paço and Reis, 2012).

#### **5. Summary and Recommendations**

Both Polish and Turkish consumers aged 18-35 do not fully understand the concept of greenwashing. The lower level of knowledge, according to the respondents' opinions, in this respect occurs in Polish respondents. Demographic characteristics such as sex, education or other descriptions of consumers as net monthly income, place of residence do not change the knowledge about greenwashing. The influence of the country of origin on the knowledge of the greenwashing concept indicates that the macro features are more important in this case. However, further analysis of the

data allowed to show that people who indicated their knowledge in the field of greenwashing could be wrong. At the same time, many of them were deceived by the green color on the packaging, i.e. they were susceptible to greenwashing activities. Both the consumer's indication of lack of knowledge as well as incomplete or incorrect knowledge about greenwashing practices are not able to provide a good basis for making good decisions on the market. Therefore, the recommended and demanding recommendation behavior is that the consumer checks the additional information on the packaging, as does the part of the consumers aware of the greenwashing concept. Otherwise, consumers become easy victims of manipulation in using information, for example, on the packaging in the form of colors used, or symbols suggesting the organicness of food products.

Although greenwashing is a relatively little-known issue among the consumers surveyed, it does not mean that it is absent. That is why it is important to teach them how to recognize it so that they can make informed decisions. Consumers are not well informed about greenwashing and cannot recognize its use in company ads and campaigns.

The attitudes of consumers cultivating green consumerism are used by companies implementing greenwashing. The lack of information of consumers favors the development of disinformation practices regarding the alleged pro-ecological activity of companies. It can therefore be concluded that the phenomenon of greenwashing is aimed against the phenomenon of green consumption and thus against sustainable development.

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