

# Greenwashing Behaviours of Selected Low-Cost Airlines Operating in the Czech Republic

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## Abstract

The air transport sector is very ambivalent. On the one hand, air transport enables people and cargo to be transported very quickly and safely around the world. On the other hand, the air transport sector has significant negative environmental impacts such as the production of greenhouse gas emissions, land use, noise, and vibration. Airlines, and especially low-cost airlines, fight for customers every day and must adapt their marketing communications accordingly. As environmental and sustainable themes have become popular among customers in recent years, low-cost airlines have been using them a lot in their marketing campaigns. In some cases, companies commit greenwashing when they communicate false, misleading, or otherwise deceptive claims. The manuscript focuses on the airline industry, respectively low-cost airlines, which are highly susceptible to using greenwashing practices to influence consumer perceptions. The aim of the article is to identify and analyse examples of greenwashing practices of selected low-cost airlines on the social network LinkedIn. Greenwashing practices were defined based on a literature review. The qualitative content analysis method was used to analyse the profiles of selected low-cost airlines on the social network LinkedIn. Subsequently, the method of qualitative comparative analysis was used to compare the greenwashing practices used by selected low-cost airlines. Based on the analysis, it can be concluded that the analysed companies use greenwashing, especially irrelevant claim, vagueness, and fibbing in their marketing communication. This may be problematic for the analysed companies in the future as it may negatively affect customer perceptions.

**KEY WORDS:** *sustainability; green marketing; consumer perceptions; air passenger transport; low-cost airline*

## 1. Introduction

In recent years, the global aviation industry has faced mounting pressure to address its significant environmental impact. As the demand for air travel continues to rise, concerns regarding carbon emissions, pollution, and sustainability have become critical issues in the pursuit of a greener future. However, amidst these environmental challenges, some airlines have resorted to engaging in greenwashing practices, wherein they misleadingly present themselves as environmentally conscious while their actions may tell a different story. This study focuses on examining the greenwashing behaviours of selected low-cost airlines operating in the Czech Republic market, shedding light on the extent to which these airlines are genuinely committed to sustainable practices.

Low-cost airlines have gained immense popularity over the years due to their affordability and accessibility, offering travellers more affordable flight options. However, their commitment to sustainable practices has often come under scrutiny. Greenwashing refers to the act of presenting misleading or unsubstantiated claims about an organization's environmental responsibility, thus creating an illusion of eco-friendliness. This deceptive practice not only misleads customers but also undermines genuine efforts towards sustainability within the aviation industry.

The Czech Republic, situated in the heart of Europe, serves as an intriguing context for studying greenwashing behaviours among low-cost airlines. The country has witnessed a significant increase in air travel, thanks to its strategic location, rich cultural heritage, and growing tourism industry. Consequently, the environmental impact of air travel and the need for sustainable practices have become pressing concerns for both industry stakeholders and environmentally conscious consumers.

## 2. Theoretical Background

The dynamic and competitive nature of the business environment has created heightened customer expectations and demands, and this has intensified the competition among companies, particularly in the realm of low-cost airlines or low-cost carriers [1]. In the present era, the emergence of low-cost airline services has led to a proliferation of airline companies, resulting in fierce competition, and as a result, airline companies are compelled to adopt market-oriented strategies to secure a significant market share [2]. With the market share of low-cost carriers on the rise and projected to increase by 21% by 2034, coupled with the relative ease of establishing a low-cost carriers business compared to a full-service carrier business, the competitive landscape within the low-cost carrier's market is continuously intensifying [3].

Low-cost carriers are based on the business model that offer competitive prices by minimizing the provision of luxury services [4-6]. Low-cost carriers provide additional services (e.g., meals and drinks, standard baggage,

preferred seats) as optional products, in contrast to full-service carriers, which include most services within their original ticket prices [7]. Low-cost carriers operate a single aircraft model to decrease costs [8] and prefer short return flights [9].

In today's world, companies strive to differentiate themselves from their competitors as much as possible [10]. The implementation and use of green marketing is one way to achieve product and company differentiation [11-12]. On the other hand, green marketing is also related to greenwashing, which does not have a uniform and stable definition [13-14]. Lyon and Maxwell [15] and Parguel, Benoit-Moreau & Larceneux [16] defined greenwashing as a "selective disclosure of positive information about a company's environmental or social performance, without full disclosure of negative information on these dimensions". Westerman et al. [17] state that greenwashing applied by companies can also have a negative impact on employees and other stakeholders.

These sins of greenwashing have been described by TerraChoice, Futerra, Contreras-Pacheco and Claasen [18-20] such as:

- Vagueness – any claim that is so poorly defined or broad that its true meaning is likely to be misunderstood by the consumer.
- Hidden trade-offs – a product is labelled "green" based on a disproportionately narrow set of characteristics, without consideration of other important environmental issues.
- No evidence – any environmental claim that cannot be substantiated by readily available supporting information or reliable third-party certification.
- Irrelevant claims – claims that may be true within the product category, but which risk distracting consumers from the larger environmental impacts of the category.
- Imaginary friends – products that give the impression of third-party endorsement, either in words or images, when in fact there is no such endorsement (fake labels).
- Fibbing – environmental claims or data that are completely fabricated.
- Unimportance – environmental claims that may be true but are unimportant or unhelpful to consumers seeking environmentally preferable products.
- Jargon – information that only a scientist could verify or understand.
- Not credible – "greening" a dangerous product does not make it safe.
- Best in class – claiming to be slightly greener than the rest, even if the rest are terrible.
- Suggestive images – green images that suggest (unjustified) green impact.
- Add bluster – exaggerating achievements or presenting alternative programmes that are not related to the main sustainability agenda.
- It's the law, stupid! – declaring sustainability achievements or commitments that are already required by existing laws or regulations.

The current climate situation requires pro-environmental changes in our daily behaviour, especially changes on an individual level have the potential to reduce greenhouse gas emissions and to prevent further negative impacts of climate change [21-22]. The transport sector, especially air transport, is a significant producer of negative environmental impacts (greenhouse gas emissions, land use, noise, vibration, etc.). This makes the air transport sector prone to use greenwashing practices. The aim of the article is to identify and analyse examples of greenwashing practices of selected low-cost airlines on the social network LinkedIn.

This paper is organized as follows: Section 2 presents a theoretical background of the issue. Section 3 describes the used methodology. Section 4 presents the obtained results and section 5 presents conclusions, and possible extensions for the future research.

### 3. Methodology

The article uses the scientific method of qualitative content analysis and qualitative comparative analysis. Kibiswa [23] define qualitative content analysis as a research methodology carried on in either an inductive or a deductive way. While in the inductive approach, researchers draw categories / themes from data they collected to start their research; in the deductive, also known as direct approach, they rather draw them from existing theory / theories to set up the categories / themes that guide their research. Thiem [24] described qualitative comparative analysis as comparisons of phenomena, works or systems etc. based on qualitative criteria. The author charted evolution of qualitative comparative analysis and he defined some standards for this type of analysis.

The methodology is based on:

- The selection of the three most important low-cost airlines operating in the Czech Republic in terms of the number of reviews on the esky.cz portal (Ryanair, WizzAir, EasyJet).
- A comprehensive content analysis of the English-language websites of these airlines by two independent researchers.
- A comparison of the websites in the context of the theoretical definition of greenwashing by two independent researchers and drawing conclusions.

About 124 low-cost airlines fly from the Czech Republic. From this number, three companies were selected according to the number of reviews on esky.cz [25] These were companies Ryanair, WizzAir, and EasyJet. Based on the source Ha, Ngan & Nguyen [26], the following keywords / green buzzwords and their variance were identified. The keywords / green buzzwords and their variance are presented in the table 1.

Table 1 Keywords / green buzzwords and their variance identified for analysis [authors based on 26]

Green	Environment	Carbon emissions
Pollution	Footprint	Carbon neutral
Net zero	Sustainable	Carbon free
NO <sub>x</sub>	Greenhouse gas emissions	Decarbonisation
CO <sub>2</sub>	Zero emissions	Emission
Carbon		

#### 4. Results

Greenwashing claims as theoretically defined by TerraChoice, Futerra, and Contreras-Pacheco and Claasen [18-20] were analysed on the official profiles of the most reviewed low-cost airlines operating in the Czech Republic (Ryanair, WizzAir, EasyJet) on the social internet platform LinkedIn [27-29]. Posts on the official profiles of these three airlines were analysed over a period of approximately 12 months (from March 2021 to March 2022). Table 2 summarizes the results of the analysis by low-cost airlines and types of greenwashing sins used.

Table 2 Summarized results by analysed low-cost airlines – types of greenwashing sins used [authors]

Type of sin of greenwashing	Ryanair	WizzAir	EasyJet
<i>“vagueness”</i>	√	√	√
<i>“no proof”</i>	√	√	xxx
<i>“add bluster”</i>	√	√	xxx
<i>“it’s the law, stupid”</i>	√	√	xxx
<i>“best in class”</i>	xxx	√	√

The results section is divided by the individual low-cost carriers analysed as follows: 4.1 Ryanair, 4.2 WizzAir, and 4.3 EasyJet.

##### 4.1 Ryanair

The profile of Ryanair was analysed. Keywords and terms related to green marketing were found in 6 posts. Examples of greenwashing were identified, such as *“vagueness”*, *“no proof”*, *“add bluster”*, and *“it’s the law, stupid”*.

The first claim that fall into the *“vagueness”* type of greenwashing is "We're becoming greener.". These are statements that are too broad or lack a clear definition. The second claim of this type of greenwashing was identified as "Europe's greenest, cleanest airline" and can also be identified as *“no proof”*. Claims were found to fall into the *“no proof”* type of greenwashing i.e., claims that lack the information necessary to assess their validity / claims that may be true but are not supported by evidence / environmental claims that cannot be substantiated by readily available supporting information or reliable third-party certification.

These two claims, *“...leadership in sustainable aviation...”* and *“...Europe's greenest, cleanest airline”*, were used in post approx. in 3rd week of 2022. According to a previous post by this company, which was shared in the 46th week of 2021 with signs of greenwashing, it cannot be clearly determined whether it is the truth. This post says: *“The CDP, an international non-profit organisation that helps companies disclose their environmental impact, has awarded Ryanair a 'B' rating for climate change...”*.

But Ryanair has only been rated in the Climate Change category for the years 2015 – 2021 (there is no Climate Protection category) and they get the same rating as EasyJet. This claim can be identified as *“add bluster”*, which means *“exaggerating achievements or presenting alternative programmes that are not related to the main sustainability agenda”*.

Claims found that fall into the *“it’s the law, stupid!”* type of greenwashing are *“...Ryanair aims to become carbon neutral by 2050 with new decarbonisation strategy – Pathway to Net Zero”*. This statement does not say that this is a European agreement / strategy and not just the intention of the company. The general non-expert public may not be aware of these strategies. It is therefore about claiming sustainability achievements or commitments that are already required by existing laws, regulations, or agreements.

The second claim in this category is *“...Ryanair's target to use 12.5 % sustainable aviation fuel by 2030...”*. This claim does not state that this is a European agreement / strategy and not just the company's intention.

##### 4.2 WizzAir

The profile of WizzAir was analysed. Keywords and terms related to green marketing were found in 29 posts. Examples of greenwashing were identified, such as *“vagueness”*, *“no proof”*, *“best in class”*, *“it’s the law, stupid!”*, and *“add bluster”*. Common claim, that was used in 18 posts is hashtag *“fly the greenest”*. This claim was identified

as “*vagueness*”. To this typology of greenwashing other claims have been included, such as green demo flight /net zero emissions.

On WizzAir’ profile, claims were found that were rated as “*no proof*” – “...we’ve managed to achieve the lowest emissions per passenger kilometre in Europe”. The claim “greenest choice” often combined with “of air travel” was used in 14 posts. This claim “greenest choice” can be, in addition to “no proof”, also “*vagueness*”. This claim mainly connecting posts with added video from series “7 reasons why Wizz Air is your greenest choice”. These posts are typical of the use of nature, animals, forests, etc. in these videos combined with the language of “...showing it doesn’t prove we care about the planet...”. Here there could be a psychological aspect to the use of the colour green, which subconsciously evokes a sense of sustainability and environmental friendliness in customers. This phenomenon is also considered by some authors as a type of image greenwashing.

There were identified claims of the “*best in class*” type of greenwashing. The first of these, “If every airline was as efficient as we are, European CO<sub>2</sub> emissions from aviation would be reduced by 34%”, was found in 3 posts and can be identified as having “*no proof*”. Another claim of this type is “...a plane will never be greener than a train or an electric car, we are and will be the greenest choice of flying”. Parts of this claim are also “*no proof*”. The “*it’s the law, stupid!*” type of greenwashing was identified in 4 posts. These posts said that the company is committed to reducing CO<sub>2</sub> emissions, reducing emissions intensity, reducing environmental footprint by the decade or year 2030. The reason these statements were included in this category is that there is an Agenda 2030.

Another type of Greenwashing “*ad bluster*” was found in 3 posts. One of them talks about the first “green demo flight” that was part of the Connecting Europe Days 2022. The second one includes sentence as “We’ve been named Most Sustainable Low-Cost Airline at the World Finance Sustainability Awards 2022!”. The third one includes sentence as “...recognized as Europe’s most sustainable airline based on the Sustainability Rating”.

### 4.3 EasyJet

The profile of **EasyJet** was analysed. Keywords and terms related to green marketing were found in 30 posts. Examples of greenwashing were identified, such as “*vagueness*” and “*best in class*”. The three most common claims found in EasyJet posts include the hashtags sustainable aviation (in 14 posts), sustainability matters (in 9 posts) and sustainability (in 8 posts).

These claims were found to be “*vagueness*”. This type of greenwash was also associated with common hashtags / claims such as Fly zero, sustainable flying, sustainable travel, sustainable tourism, “Holidays that don’t cost the earth”, race to zero and sustainable mobility.

The “*best in class*” type of greenwashing was identified in two identical posts. These posts said “...we are the first UK low-cost carrier to receive an Environmental Assessment programme Stage 1 accreditation...”. For the purposes of this post, it is not important whether they are the first or not. We have included this post in this category because it relates to the first place in transport, which is generally considered to be one of the least green.

## 5. Conclusions

The use of green marketing communication is very important for the airline industry because the industry also has negative environmental and social impacts and green marketing communication promotes a positive perception of companies and products by their customers, consumers, and other stakeholders.

The aim of this paper was to identify and analyse examples of greenwashing behaviour in selected airlines. Based on the analysis, it can be concluded that examples of greenwashing have been identified in some posts on official company profiles on the LinkedIn platform. This could be due to mistranslation of the website into English, professional ignorance, or deliberate intent. The limitation of the research is the number of companies analysed (three in total), as there are other companies in the industry that are suitable for analysis. Another limitation is that only English language websites were analysed, not other language versions.

Based on this manuscript, many future research steps can be defined. Conduct a comprehensive analysis to measure and compare the extent of greenwashing behaviours among different low-cost airlines operating in the Czech Republic. Investigate the impact of greenwashing behaviours on consumer perception and behaviour. Examine the existing regulatory framework governing greenwashing practices in the aviation industry. Explore the perspectives of various stakeholders, such as industry experts, policymakers, and environmental organizations, on greenwashing behaviours in the aviation sector.

By pursuing these future research steps, a more comprehensive understanding of greenwashing behaviours among low-cost airlines operating in the Czech Republic can be achieved. The findings can inform policymakers, industry stakeholders, and consumers in their efforts to promote genuine sustainability practices and combat greenwashing in the aviation sector.

## Acknowledgement

The paper is published within the solution of the scientific research project of the University of Pardubice no. SGS\_2023\_017. The authors are grateful for their support.

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