



THE ROLE OF GREEN MARKETING AND GREENWASHING IN SHAPING THE ORGANIC FOOD MARKET IN POLAND

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Abstract

The aim of this article was to analyse the role of green marketing and the phenomenon of greenwashing in shaping the organic food market in Poland. To achieve this objective, a literature review was conducted alongside a diagnostic survey using the CAWI method, covering a sample of 168 consumers. The study focused on evaluating consumer awareness, trust in marketing activities, and perceptions of greenwashing. The research results indicate that consumer awareness of the concept of greenwashing is low, with only 24.4% of respondents able to correctly define the term. Respondents declared moderate trust in the marketing efforts of organic food companies, with eco-certificates and product labels being identified as the main factors fostering brand credibility. Additionally, 35.4% of participants reported encountering greenwashing practices, highlighting the need for transparent and authentic marketing communication. High product prices were identified as the primary barrier limiting the purchase of organic food. The study findings emphasize the necessity of authentic green marketing supported by credible certification, transparent messaging, and educational initiatives to increase consumer awareness and trust, ultimately supporting the sustainable development of the organic food market in Poland.

ZIELONY MARKETING I ZJAWISKO GREENWASHINGU W KSZTAŁTOWANIU RYNKU ŻYWNOSCI EKOLOGICZNEJ W POLSCE

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Słowa kluczowe: zielony marketing, greenwashing, żywność ekologiczna, świadomość konsumentów, zaufanie do marki.

Abstrakt

Celem badań była identyfikacja znaczenia zielonego marketingu oraz zjawiska greenwashingu w kształtowaniu rynku żywności ekologicznej w Polsce. W badaniach wykorzystano przegląd literatury oraz sondaż diagnostyczny przeprowadzony metodą CAWI na próbie 168 konsumentów. Analiza koncentrowała się na ocenie świadomości konsumentów, poziomu zaufania do działań marketingowych oraz percepcji greenwashingu. Wyniki badań wskazały na niski poziom świadomości tego zjawiska – jedynie 24,4% respondentów potrafiło poprawnie zdefiniować pojęcie greenwashingu. Badani deklarowali umiarkowane zaufanie do działań marketingowych firm oferujących żywność ekologiczną, przy czym za najważniejsze czynniki budujące wiarygodność uznali certyfikaty ekologiczne oraz oznaczenia na opakowaniach. Dodatkowo 35,4% respondentów zadeklarowało, że spotkało się z przypadkami greenwashingu, co podkreśla potrzebę większej transparentności i autentyczności w komunikacji marketingowej. Najczęściej wskazywaną barierą zakupu żywności ekologicznej była jej wysoka cena. Wyniki badań podkreślają znaczenie prowadzenia rzetelnego zielonego marketingu, wspartego wiarygodną certyfikacją, przejrzystą komunikacją oraz działaniami edukacyjnymi, które mogą zwiększyć zaufanie konsumentów i wspierać zrównoważony rozwój rynku żywności ekologicznej w Polsce.

Introduction

The contemporary organic food market is developing dynamically in response to growing consumer interest in healthy lifestyles, environmental protection, and sustainable consumption (Kuberska *et al.*, 2020). Despite this growth, the segment remains niche in Poland, particularly in terms of domestic demand, which is limited by low public awareness and the relatively high prices of organic products (Grzybowska-Brzezińska, 2020, p. 114). Marketing activities play a key role in shaping consumer preferences, aiming not only to inform about organic products but also to build brand trust and support a positive ecological image (Nestorowicz, 2010, p. 395).

One of the important trends in contemporary marketing is green marketing, which includes strategies promoting environmentally friendly products through, among other things, the use of ecological packaging, certification, and advertising messages emphasizing environmental care (Ihnatenko, 2022, p. 25, 26).

Green marketing not only addresses the needs of environmentally conscious consumers but also aligns with the broader paradigm of sustainable development (Bojanowska, 2022, p. 17).

Alongside genuine pro-environmental efforts, the phenomenon of greenwashing has emerged – defined as misleading consumers about the actual environmental benefits of a product, service, or company activity (Mazur-Wierzbicka, 2022, p. 284). Greenwashing poses a significant threat to the credibility of marketing communication, as it can lead to declining consumer trust and growing skepticism towards environmental claims (Vangeli *et al.*, 2023, p. 281). In the Polish organic food market, certifications and information provided on packaging are of key importance, as they strengthen consumer trust and support the development of this sector. At the same time, consumers are increasingly recognizing dishonest marketing practices (Kuczuk, 2022, p. 9).

This raises the question: what is the actual significance of green marketing and the phenomenon of greenwashing in shaping the food market, as indicated by the study participants?

Literature Review

Green marketing, also known as eco-marketing or environmental marketing, has for several decades constituted a significant area of research and analysis in both domestic and international literature. Its growing importance stems from global environmental challenges as well as increasing consumer awareness regarding the environmental impact of products and services (Ihnatenko, 2022, p. 25, 26).

Pro-environmental marketing strategy is defined as a set of actions aimed at promoting goods and services with a reduced environmental impact (Nestorowicz, 2010, p. 395). Commonly used practices within green marketing include reducing greenhouse gas (GHG) emissions in production processes, using packaging made from recycled materials, and running campaigns that promote environmental responsibility (Ćalasan *et al.*, 2021, p. 73). Moreover, the core tools of green marketing encompass the classical elements of the marketing mix – product, price, promotion, and distribution (Mahmoud, 2018, p. 128, 129). It is essential not only to adapt the product to meet environmental requirements but also to communicate this value to customers effectively and credibly (Bojanowska, 2022, p. 17).

To effectively support the development of the organic food market, green marketing activities should be coherent and focused on building consumer awareness and trust. This requires not only implementing pro-environmental practices at the company level but also ensuring transparent marketing communication, supported by recognized certifications and eco-labels

(Nestorowicz, 2010, p. 395). Only through such an approach can consumer trust be fostered and the risk of greenwashing mitigated (de Freitas Netto *et al.*, 2020, p. 8, 9).

Greenwashing is a marketing strategy wherein companies exaggerate or falsify the environmental attributes of their products or services to attract and retain environmentally conscious consumers. These actions, although intended to gain market advantage, are often not backed by actual environmental practices (Somany, 2023, p. 908). Greenwashing undermines brand trust and can diminish the effectiveness of marketing based on genuine environmental concern (Mazur-Wierzbicka, 2022, p. 284). A company's excessive focus on creating a "green" image without substantive actions may lead to resource waste, reduced production efficiency, and decreased trust among customers and regulatory bodies (Alvarado *et al.*, 2024, p. 109).

Consumers increasingly expect not only pro-environmental declarations but also their validation through recognized certifications and eco-labels (Nestorowicz, 2010, p. 395). Transparency of actions has become critical for building customer loyalty and long-term brand reputation (Qayyum *et al.*, 2023, p. 289). At the same time, the rising number of greenwashing cases can erode consumer trust not only in individual companies but in the entire category of organic products, thereby hindering the development of the organic food market (Somany, 2023, p. 909). Local food is increasingly seen as part of sustainable consumption practices, although the lack of a clear definition complicates its unambiguous classification in the context of sustainable development (Cappelli *et al.*, 2022, p. 8). Consumers attach great importance to product quality and origin labels, yet trust in certifications and the interpretation of "locality" vary among consumer groups, which may foster misunderstandings and communication abuses associated with greenwashing (Hristov *et al.*, 2023, p. 10). Additionally, the development of a company's green reputation may mediate between green marketing efforts and their actual environmental outcomes, strengthening consumer confidence in declared eco-friendly actions (Wang & Juo, 2024, p. 1758). Furthermore, research shows that individual elements of green marketing, such as price and point of sale, significantly influence repurchase intentions, with consumer ecological knowledge further enhancing these relationships (Mahmoud *et al.*, 2024, p. 503). Ecological certification plays a crucial role in building consumer trust, though the current system requires improvements to reduce the risk of violations and enhance the credibility of the entire supply chain (Kononets *et al.*, 2023, p. 2). Despite high levels of trust in certified organic products in Europe, significant differences exist between countries in preferences for national versus EU certification schemes (Murphy *et al.*, 2022, p. 2).

Research Methodology

The aim of the study was to identify the role of green marketing and the phenomenon of greenwashing in shaping the organic food market in Poland. The research employed the diagnostic survey method, which enabled the collection of data directly from respondents and provided insight into their opinions, knowledge, and attitudes toward issues related to green marketing and greenwashing in the organic food market. The research tool was a proprietary questionnaire, developed based on the literature on the subject and previous studies on consumer behavior in the organic products market (Nestorowicz, 2010, p. 395; Mazur-Wierzbicka, 2022, p. 284).

The study was conducted in the form of an online survey (CAWI – Computer-Assisted Web Interviewing), which allowed for access to a diverse group of respondents and ensured the anonymity of the responses. The questionnaire was distributed via social media and personal contact networks between March and April 2023. A total of 168 individuals participated in the survey, of whom 66.7% were women and 33.3% men. The questionnaire consisted of 15 closed and semi-open questions. The questions were designed to allow for both quantitative analysis and interpretation in the context of the existing body of literature. Basic descriptive statistical methods were used in the data analysis: structural indicators and means were calculated, and relationships between variables were examined (Grzybowska-Brzezińska, 2020, p. 114). The sample selection was non-random and purposive, targeting individuals who expressed interest in the topic of organic food or declared that they purchase such products.

Results

The conducted survey enabled an assessment of consumer awareness levels, their trust in marketing activities, and their experiences with greenwashing in the organic food market. The results indicate varied levels of knowledge and attitudes among respondents regarding issues related to green marketing.

The study revealed familiarity with the concept of greenwashing, analyzed by gender and level of education. The concept of greenwashing was incorrectly defined by 23.8% of respondents, which indicates a low level of public awareness in this area. The highest percentage of correct responses was recorded among women with higher education (35.7%) and men with higher education (13.5%) (Tab. 1).

Table 1

The definition of greenwashing in public opinion

Sex	Education	Correct definition	Wrong definition
		%	
Female	higher	35.7	8.4
	secondary	14.6	8.3
	vocational	1.0	0.0
	primary	1.0	2.0
Male	higher	13.5	2.1
	secondary	8.3	2.0
	vocational	2.1	1.0
	primary	0.0	0.0

Source: developed by author.

Another area of the study focused on the motives for purchasing organic food. The most frequently cited reason for choosing such products was concern for personal and family health, indicated by 74.0% of respondents, along with health-related benefits (64.6%). Other commonly mentioned motives included better product quality (48%) and concern for the environment (43.7%) (Fig. 1).

The study also made it possible to identify the main barriers limiting the purchase of organic food. The most frequently cited obstacle was the high price, indicated by as many as 88.2% of respondents. Other significant barriers included attachment to existing dietary habits (54.2%) and limited product availability (52.4%). A lack of trust was mentioned by 19.7% of respondents. The findings indicate that economic factors and a lack of credibility remain key challenges in the organic food market (Fig. 2).

Particular attention should be given to the data concerning consumers' experiences with greenwashing. Exactly 35.4% of respondents stated that they had encountered cases of greenwashing in the organic food market, most often pointing to discrepancies between producers' claims and their actual practices, as well as a lack of credibility confirmed by certifications. The findings confirm that greenwashing poses a threat to consumer trust and the development of the organic products market (Fig. 3). Respondents also identified their preferred places for purchasing organic food (Fig. 4).

Supermarkets were the most commonly chosen (68.8%), followed by marketplaces (61.4%) and organic stores (42.6%). Only 13.5% of respondents declared shopping at organic bazaars, indicating the limited popularity of this sales channel within the organic food market. To increase consumer interest in such products, green marketing should be more effective, credible, and based on reliable information, as organic food – despite increasing public awareness – still reaches a relatively narrow group of consumers.

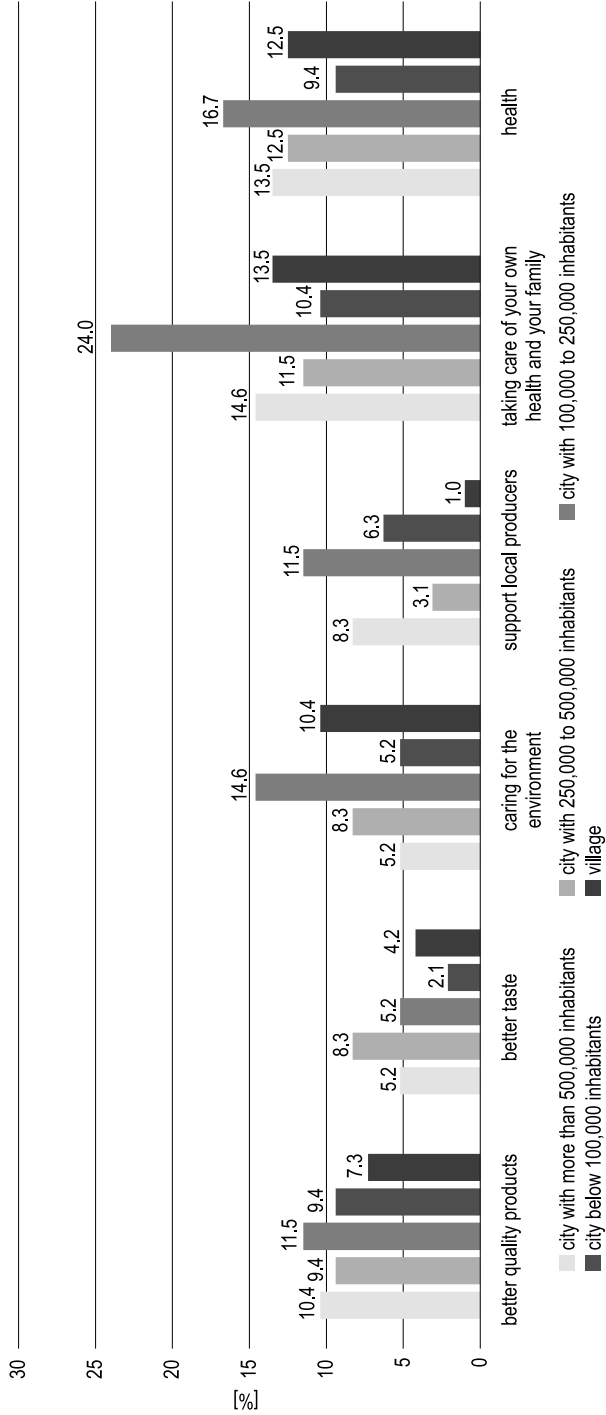


Fig. 1. Motivations for purchasing organic food as indicated by respondents [%]

Source: developed by author.

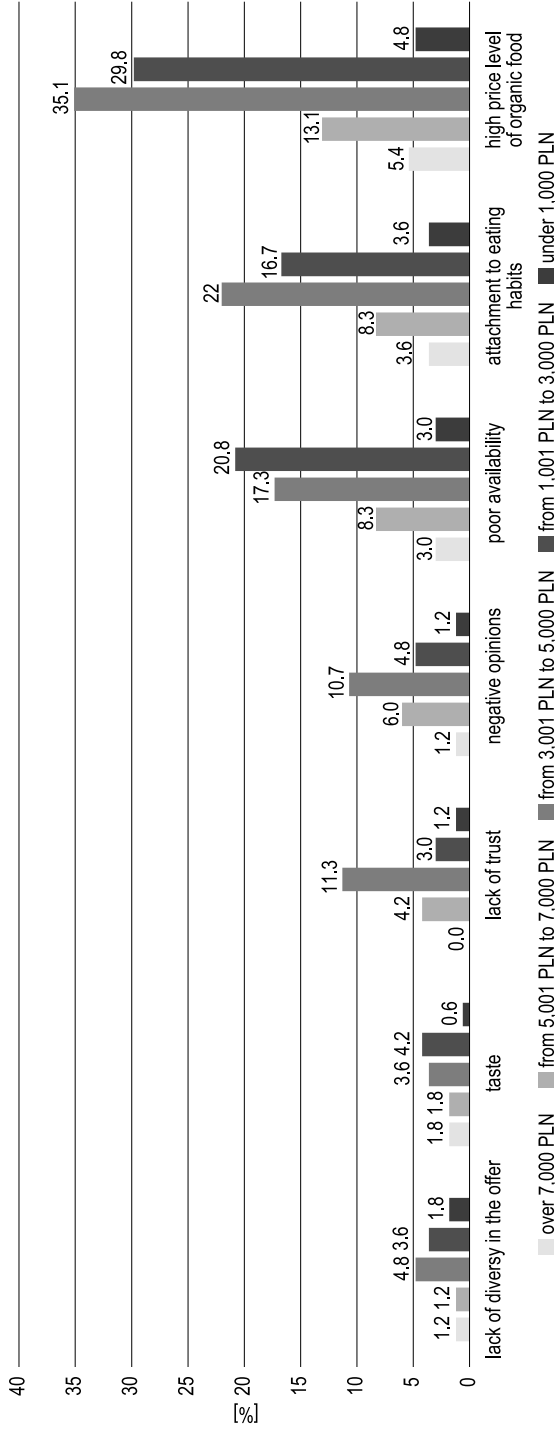


Fig. 2. Barriers to purchasing organic food according to respondents [%]

Source: developed by author.

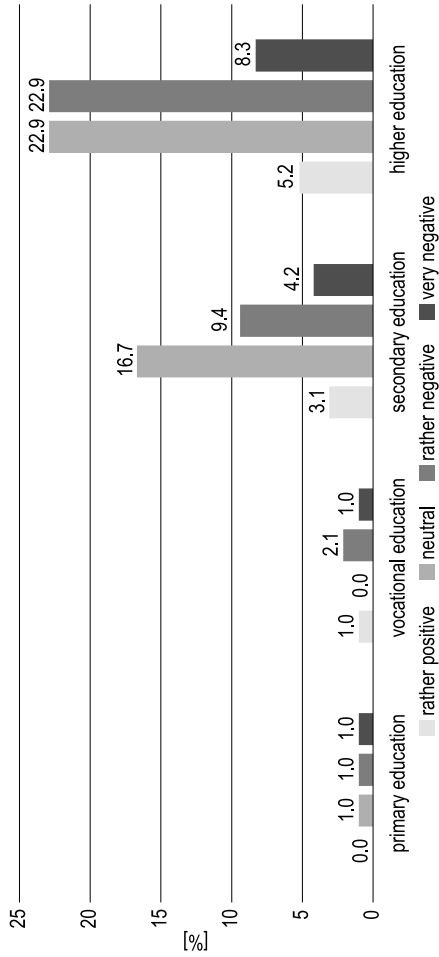


Fig. 3. Respondents' experiences and observations related to greenwashing [%]

Source: developed by author.

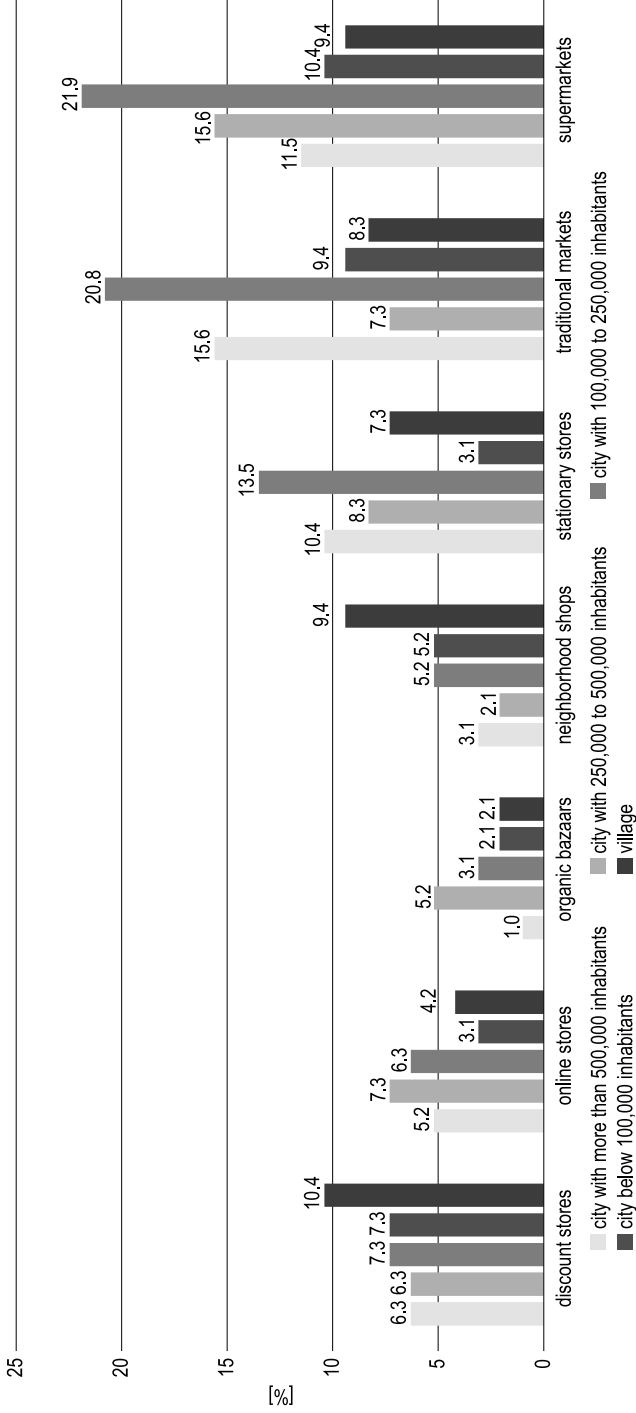


Fig. 4. Preferred places for purchasing organic food according to respondents [%]

Source: developed by author.

Conclusion

Based on the conducted research, it can be concluded that green marketing plays a significant role in shaping the food market; however, its effectiveness is limited by the low level of public awareness and a lack of trust in marketing messages. The phenomenon of greenwashing, which respondents perceive as widespread and associated with discrepancies between producers' claims and reality, poses a serious threat to consumer trust and hinders the development of the organic products market. Ecological certifications and transparent marketing communication play a key role in building trust. At the same time, the low level of awareness of the concept of greenwashing and the relatively high percentage of respondents reporting negative experiences with this phenomenon confirm the need for educational and regulatory actions aimed at strengthening consumer protection and promoting authentic pro-environmental initiatives.

The study confirms growing consumer interest in organic food; however, purchasing decisions are still strongly limited by economic factors and a lack of trust in producers' claims. The high percentage of individuals declaring contact with greenwashing indicates that it is a real issue that may negatively impact the development of this market segment. In reference to the stated research problem regarding the actual significance of green marketing, it can be concluded that respondents expect greater transparency and credibility in marketing activities, particularly through certification and consistent communication. Addressing the issue of greenwashing should be based on building trust and undertaking genuine, transparent pro-environmental actions.

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