

Beyond the Green Claim: Greenwashing, Sustainability and Environmental Accountability in Cyprus

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Abstract: As sustainability becomes increasingly embedded within environmental policy, professional practice and consumer culture, its language has also become a powerful mechanism for communicating environmental responsibility. Terms such as green, eco-friendly, natural, sustainable and environmentally responsible are now widely used across products, services and the built environment. Yet the increasing visibility of this language does not necessarily correspond with measurable environmental performance. This tension has intensified concerns surrounding greenwashing, whereby environmental claims, imagery or sustainability narratives may exaggerate, simplify or inadequately substantiate the ecological credentials of a product, organisation or project.

This article critically examines greenwashing within the context of Cyprus, with particular attention to the built environment, architecture and Interior Design. Adopting a critical, conceptual and practice-informed approach, it draws on contemporary academic literature, European Union legislation, the developing Cypriot regulatory context, and the author's research and professional experience in Interior Design and sustainability education. The analysis considers environmental claims, material specification, certification, visual representations of “green” design and circularity, alongside the increasing requirement for credible and verifiable environmental information. It further examines how Cyprus's climatic conditions, dependence on imported materials, construction practices and evolving sustainability landscape influence the translation of environmental ambition into professional practice.

The article argues that addressing greenwashing requires more than eliminating misleading terminology; it demands a broader transition from Claim → Evidence → Practice → Accountability. This conceptual progression provides a framework for examining whether sustainability claims are supported by credible evidence, translated into professional decision-making and followed by accountability for environmental outcomes. By positioning environmental transparency as both a professional and ethical responsibility, the article argues for a more credible and evidence-based sustainability culture in Cyprus.

Keywords: Greenwashing, Sustainability, Cyprus, Interior Design, Built Environment, Environmental Claims, Environmental Accountability, Circular Economy



Introduction: When Sustainability Becomes a Claim

Sustainability has moved from the margins of environmental debate to become a defining principle of contemporary policy, business, design and consumer culture. Governments promote green transitions, organisations publish environmental commitments, manufacturers advertise sustainable products, and designers increasingly describe buildings and interiors through terms such as green, eco-friendly, natural, low-carbon, circular and environmentally responsible. This shift reflects a necessary response to climate change, resource depletion, waste generation and the environmental consequences of global production and consumption. Yet the growing visibility of sustainability has also created a paradox: as environmental responsibility becomes more valuable, the incentive to appear sustainable can increase faster than the capacity or willingness to demonstrate meaningful environmental performance.

Greenwashing emerges within this tension between environmental communication and environmental action. Although definitions vary across disciplines, the concept broadly describes a mismatch between the environmental impression communicated by an organisation, product or activity and the environmental performance that can actually be substantiated (Bernini et al., 2024, Huang et al., 2025). Greenwashing can therefore extend beyond deliberately false statements to include selective disclosure, vague terminology, unsupported claims, irrelevant certifications, exaggerated benefits or the strategic omission of less favourable environmental impacts. Contemporary research consequently characterises greenwashing as a multidimensional phenomenon rather than a single deceptive act, making its identification and measurement particularly complex (Santos et al., 2024, Huang et al., 2025).

This distinction is significant because sustainability increasingly influences consumer trust and professional legitimacy. Unsupported or selectively communicated environmental language can encourage consumers to perceive products, services or organisations as environmentally preferable without sufficient evidence for informed comparison. At the same time, businesses investing in substantive environmental improvement may compete with organisations capable of constructing similar environmental identities primarily through communication. Greenwashing therefore represents more than a marketing problem; it can distort the informational conditions through which sustainable choices are made and weaken confidence in legitimate environmental action.

The scale of this concern has become increasingly visible within European policy. A European Commission assessment reported that 53.3 per cent of examined environmental claims were vague, misleading or unfounded, while 40 per cent lacked supporting evidence (European Commission, 2023). Directive (EU) 2024/825 represents an important regulatory response by strengthening consumer protection against misleading environmental communication and unreliable sustainability labels. Generic expressions such as green, eco-friendly and environmentally friendly increasingly require substantiation rather than functioning simply as persuasive language. Significantly, European regulation also recognises that environmental impressions may be created not only through written claims but through colours, imagery and other forms of implicit communication (European Parliament and Council of the European Union, 2024a).

This is particularly relevant to architecture and Interior Design, where environmental responsibility is communicated both technically and visually. Sustainability may be represented through vegetation, natural materials, earthy colour palettes, recycled finishes, environmental labels or references to biophilic and circular design. These strategies may form part of genuinely sustainable practice, but their presence alone does not establish environmental performance. A visually “green” interior may still depend on carbon-intensive materials, imported products, short replacement cycles or resource-intensive construction, while a space without an explicitly green visual identity may incorporate durable materials, adaptive reuse, energy-conscious decisions and responsible procurement. Environmental appearance and environmental performance are therefore not necessarily equivalent.

The problem is intensified by the interconnected environmental impacts of the built environment. Decisions concerning materials, energy, construction, refurbishment, maintenance and eventual disposal extend across supply chains and professional disciplines. Within Interior Design specifically, frequent renovation cycles and intensive material specification create conditions in which environmental claims require careful examination. Describing a material as “natural”, a refurbishment as “green”, or an interior as “sustainable” provides limited environmental meaning unless the claim can be connected to relevant evidence concerning characteristics such as provenance, durability, emissions, recycled content, embodied impacts, resource efficiency, reuse or credible third-party certification.

Cyprus provides a particularly relevant context in which to examine these tensions. Sustainability discourse is expanding alongside European environmental policy, changing consumer expectations and growing professional awareness, while the island's climatic conditions, dependence on imported products and materials, construction practices and economic structure create specific challenges for implementation. The Cyprus Consumer Protection Service's recent guidance on the Green Transition further demonstrates that environmental claims and greenwashing are becoming questions of consumer protection and business responsibility rather than merely voluntary ethical considerations (Cyprus Consumer Protection Service, 2026).

The central challenge, therefore, is no longer simply encouraging organisations and professionals to speak about sustainability, but ensuring that what is communicated as sustainable can be demonstrated as such. For Cyprus, and particularly for its design and built-environment sectors, this requires a transition from broad environmental terminology and imagery towards transparent evidence, informed specification and accountable professional practice. Greenwashing ultimately exposes a fundamental distinction between looking sustainable, claiming sustainability and demonstrating sustainability. Understanding that distinction is essential if sustainability is to retain its meaning as an environmental responsibility rather than becoming another aesthetic or commercial identity.

Approach and Scope

This article adopts a critical, conceptual and practice-informed approach to examining greenwashing within Cyprus, with particular attention to Interior Design, architecture and the wider built environment. Rather than presenting a systematic literature review or reporting new empirical participant data, the article develops its argument through the interpretation of selected contemporary academic literature, European Union legislation, Cypriot policy and regulatory developments, alongside the author's research and professional experience in Interior Design and sustainability education in Cyprus. This approach enables greenwashing to be considered not only as a marketing or consumer-protection issue, but also as a question of professional design responsibility, environmental communication and evidence-based decision-making.

The literature and policy material considered were selected for their direct relevance to greenwashing, environmental claims, sustainable Interior Design, material specification, circularity, environmental certification and the evolving regulatory context of Cyprus and the European Union. Particular attention is given to sources that distinguish environmental communication from demonstrable environmental performance. The Cyprus context is examined through relevant national and European policy developments alongside the practical conditions influencing sustainability implementation within the built environment.

The analysis is interpretative and is not intended to measure the prevalence of greenwashing in Cyprus. Accordingly, the article does not seek to determine how frequently greenwashing occurs or to evaluate individual organisations, products or projects. Instead, it examines the conditions through which environmental claims may become disconnected from supporting evidence, professional decisions and environmental outcomes. From this analysis, the article develops the conceptual progression Claim → Evidence → Practice → Accountability as a framework for interrogating the relationship between sustainability communication and environmental responsibility. The framework is intended to support critical evaluation rather than provide a quantitative measure of sustainability, drawing attention to whether environmental claims are substantiated, translated into practice and ultimately connected to accountable outcomes.

From Environmental Responsibility to Greenwashing

The increasing prominence of sustainability has fundamentally changed how organisations communicate environmental responsibility. Environmental performance is no longer confined to technical reports, regulatory compliance or specialist environmental management; it has become part of branding, corporate identity, product differentiation and consumer engagement. Organisations increasingly recognise that environmental responsibility can strengthen reputation, respond to changing consumer expectations and demonstrate alignment with wider climate and sustainability objectives. This development can encourage meaningful environmental improvement, but it can also create conditions in which sustainability communication becomes more developed than the environmental practices supporting it. Greenwashing emerges precisely within this gap between what is communicated and what can be demonstrated.

The concept of greenwashing is commonly associated with misleading environmental communication, yet the phenomenon is considerably more complex than simply making a false claim. Greenwashing may occur when organisations selectively disclose favourable environmental information while withholding less favourable impacts, when symbolic commitments exceed substantive environmental action, or when broad sustainability narratives are constructed around relatively minor improvements. Research identifies selective disclosure and the decoupling of environmental communication from environmental performance as central dimensions through which greenwashing can be understood (Delmas and Burbano, 2011, Lyon and Montgomery, 2015, Santos et al., 2024). A claim may therefore contain truthful information while still producing a misleading overall impression. A product containing recycled material, for example, may legitimately communicate that characteristic, yet the claim becomes problematic if it encourages consumers to interpret the entire product as environmentally sustainable without considering manufacturing impacts, durability, transportation, toxicity or end-of-life consequences.

This distinction between false information and selective truth is particularly important. Greenwashing does not always operate through statements that can easily be classified as factually incorrect; it can emerge through emphasis, omission, ambiguity and context. Terms such as green, eco-friendly, sustainable, responsible, natural and climate-friendly can create powerful environmental associations while communicating relatively little about measurable performance. Without clearly defined criteria, such terminology allows environmental value to be suggested without identifying what has improved, compared with what baseline, across which lifecycle stage, or according to which independently verified evidence. The claim may therefore function persuasively while remaining difficult for consumers to evaluate (European Parliament and Council of the European Union, 2024a).

However, the distinction between credible sustainability communication and greenwashing is not straightforward. Requiring environmental claims to be supported by evidence can improve transparency, but the existence of evidence does not necessarily provide a complete representation of environmental responsibility. A claim can be technically accurate while remaining environmentally selective. Communicating one favourable characteristic may be factually substantiated while drawing attention away from impacts associated with manufacture, durability, chemical composition or end-of-life recovery. The critical issue is therefore not simply whether evidence exists, but whether the scope of the evidence is proportionate to the scope of the environmental impression being created. Substantiation is necessary, but it should not be treated as sufficient protection against greenwashing.

Greater quantities of environmental information do not automatically produce greater transparency. Consumers and professionals may encounter certification schemes, lifecycle information, environmental declarations and performance indicators without necessarily possessing the knowledge required to interpret or compare them. The European Commission's identification of more than 230 sustainability labels within the European market illustrates this tension: mechanisms intended to improve transparency can themselves contribute to informational complexity (European Commission, 2023). The challenge is therefore not simply the availability of environmental information, but also its accessibility, comparability and interpretability.

Greenwashing should consequently not be understood solely as a binary distinction between truthful and deceptive communication. Environmental performance frequently involves trade-offs, and a product or project may perform positively according to one criterion while performing less favourably according to another. A material may contain recycled content but require long-distance transportation; a durable product may carry comparatively high embodied impacts; a locally available material may lack comprehensive environmental documentation; and a certified product may address only the criteria included within its particular assessment methodology. Describing any of these options simply as “sustainable” can obscure the conditional and multidimensional nature of environmental performance.

The critical question therefore extends beyond whether an environmental claim is technically true. It also requires consideration of what the claim includes, what it excludes, how environmentally significant the claimed improvement is, and whether the overall impression remains proportionate to the available evidence. This does not mean that environmental perfection must be demonstrated before sustainability can be communicated. Rather, credible communication requires sufficient transparency regarding both achievements and limitations. Greenwashing can therefore emerge not only through the absence of environmental action, but also through the selective representation of genuine environmental action.

Visual communication further complicates this problem. Environmental meaning can be constructed through images of forests, leaves, water, natural landscapes, earthy colours, recycled textures and other visual associations

even when no explicit environmental statement is made. This is particularly significant under the developing European regulatory framework, which recognises that environmental claims may take textual, pictorial, graphic or symbolic forms. Sustainability communication therefore extends beyond literal wording to encompass the environmental impression created through language, imagery, labels, certification marks and presentation. For design disciplines, where visual communication is central to professional and commercial practice, this wider understanding of environmental claims has substantial implications (European Parliament and Council of the European Union, 2024a).

Certification and environmental labels can help distinguish substantiated environmental performance from unsupported claims, but they also introduce complexity. Sustainability labels differ in their methodologies, transparency and verification requirements, and a label may appear authoritative without consumers necessarily understanding who created it, what it measures or whether compliance has been independently assessed. Directive (EU) 2024/825 responds to this problem by strengthening requirements surrounding sustainability labels and placing particular importance on credible certification schemes and labels established by public authorities. The regulatory direction is therefore moving away from self-created environmental symbols and loosely substantiated sustainability language towards claims supported through transparent criteria and credible verification (European Parliament and Council of the European Union, 2024a).

Yet certification should itself be interpreted critically. A recognised label can strengthen the credibility of a particular environmental claim, but it does not necessarily demonstrate comprehensive sustainability. Certification systems differ in scope, assessment criteria, weighting and verification processes, meaning that strong performance against one framework may coexist with environmental impacts beyond what that framework evaluates. Certification should therefore function as evidence within a wider environmental assessment rather than as a substitute for critical evaluation. This distinction becomes particularly important when certification is communicated as proof that a product, organisation or project is sustainable in its entirety.

The same principle applies to future environmental commitments. Organisations frequently communicate aspirations such as becoming net zero, carbon neutral or climate positive. Such commitments may represent legitimate transition strategies when supported by measurable targets, implementation plans, allocated resources and transparent monitoring. However, future-oriented sustainability language can also create an immediate impression of environmental leadership despite the anticipated improvement remaining unrealised. European regulation increasingly reflects this concern by requiring claims concerning future environmental performance to be supported by clear, objective, publicly available and verifiable commitments (European Parliament and Council of the European Union, 2024a). The distinction is important: an environmental ambition is not equivalent to an environmental achievement.

Greenwashing in the Built Environment and Interior Design

The built environment occupies a particularly complex position within the greenwashing debate. Buildings and interiors are increasingly presented through the language of sustainability, resilience, circularity, wellbeing and environmental responsibility, yet their environmental performance cannot be understood through a single visible feature or product choice. A building may incorporate renewable energy while relying on carbon-intensive materials; an interior may specify recycled finishes while undergoing frequent replacement; and a hospitality project may be promoted through biophilic imagery while depending on imported materials, intensive cooling and resource-heavy refurbishment. Sustainability within the built environment is therefore relational and systemic, emerging from interactions between materials, energy, construction, operation, maintenance, adaptation, user behaviour and eventual end-of-life processes. When environmental communication isolates one favourable characteristic from this wider system, the possibility of greenwashing becomes particularly significant.

Architecture has long used representation to communicate values beyond physical performance. Renderings, photographs, material palettes and promotional narratives construct an identity for a project before users encounter the completed space. As sustainability has become increasingly desirable, environmental responsibility has entered this representational language. Vegetation-covered façades, green roofs, timber surfaces, daylight-filled interiors and abundant planting now frequently operate as visual shorthand for sustainable architecture. These elements may offer genuine environmental or experiential benefits, but their presence does not independently demonstrate that a project has reduced its environmental impact. Previous architectural research has warned that sustainability can become an advertising strategy when its symbolic value is disconnected from comprehensive environmental, social and economic performance (Erden and Öktem Erkartal, 2019).

This distinction becomes particularly relevant within Interior Design because environmental communication and aesthetic experience are closely interconnected. Interiors can appear environmentally responsible through natural colours, timber, stone, plants, recycled-looking surfaces and references to craftsmanship or locality. Such strategies can contribute meaningfully to sustainable design when connected to responsible sourcing, durability, low toxicity, reparability, reuse and lifecycle performance. However, visual naturalness should not be confused with environmental sustainability. A material that appears natural may require intensive extraction, processing or transportation; timber may be renewable while still raising questions concerning forestry practices, adhesives, finishes and distance travelled; and recycled materials may contain secondary content while remaining difficult to repair or recycle again. Environmental performance therefore cannot reliably be inferred from appearance alone.

Biophilic design illustrates this tension particularly clearly. Incorporating nature into interior environments can support relationships between people and the natural world, but the growing popularity of biophilic aesthetics can encourage the reduction of the concept to plants, green walls and nature-inspired decoration. An interior may consequently be described as “green” or “biophilic” because vegetation is visually prominent even though broader environmental impacts remain unexamined. The problem is not the use of plants or natural references themselves, but the assumption that environmental imagery automatically signifies environmental performance. When sustainability is communicated primarily through what a space looks like, environmental responsibility risks becoming an aesthetic category rather than a measurable design process.

Material specification represents another major area of vulnerability. Interior Designers make decisions involving flooring, wall finishes, ceilings, furniture, textiles, lighting and numerous manufactured products, each carrying environmental consequences across extraction, manufacture, transportation, installation, maintenance and disposal. Research has identified a continuing gap between the importance attributed to environmentally sustainable Interior Design and the frequency with which sustainable material choices are implemented in professional practice (Hayles, 2015). More recent research into Interior Design supply chains has identified challenges involving supplier transparency, environmental information, material availability, costs and verification, demonstrating how procurement and fragmented supply processes can complicate sustainable implementation (Payer, Buics and Eisingerné Balassa, 2026).

Manufacturers increasingly communicate attributes such as recycled content, low emissions, renewable ingredients, responsible sourcing or recyclability. Such information can support responsible specification when claims are precise and substantiated, but problems emerge when a limited attribute is used to characterise the environmental performance of an entire product. A carpet containing recycled fibres, for example, may represent improvement in one area without resolving questions concerning chemical composition, manufacturing energy, durability, installation adhesives, transportation or end-of-life recovery. Similarly, a product marketed as recyclable may provide limited environmental benefit where realistic collection or recycling infrastructure is absent. The distinction between theoretical recyclability and actual circularity is therefore critical.

Material specification also exposes a wider tension: environmentally preferable choices are rarely absolute. A locally available material may reduce transportation requirements but provide limited environmental documentation; an imported certified product may offer stronger evidence while introducing additional transportation impacts; a highly durable material may require resource-intensive manufacture; and recycled content may coexist with substances that complicate future recovery. Sustainability therefore involves comparison and negotiation between environmental priorities rather than the identification of a universally “sustainable” material.

Technical evidence can strengthen these decisions without eliminating the need for professional judgement. Life Cycle Assessment (LCA) provides one mechanism for examining impacts across different lifecycle stages, while Environmental Product Declarations (EPDs) can communicate standardised environmental information about construction products. Research suggests that transparent environmental declarations can contribute to combating greenwashing by providing more structured and comparable evidence, although their effectiveness depends on the quality, transparency and interpretation of the information provided (Moshood, Rotimi and Rotimi, 2024). Environmental data should therefore not itself be interpreted as proof of sustainability; its scope, assumptions and relevance to the design context remain important.

Certification systems similarly provide valuable frameworks while requiring careful interpretation. LEED, BREEAM and WELL have increased professional awareness of environmental performance, resource efficiency and occupant wellbeing and can introduce structured criteria into projects that might otherwise rely on broad

sustainability language. Yet different systems assess different criteria, use different weighting structures and operate at different scales. A certified building may perform strongly within a particular framework while still presenting environmental trade-offs beyond its scope. Certification is therefore most credible when understood as evidence of performance against defined criteria rather than as an unrestricted declaration that a project is sustainable in its entirety.

The pace of Interior Design change further complicates environmental claims. Unlike structural building components that may remain for decades, interiors can be replaced comparatively frequently in response to ownership, branding, fashion, tenancy or commercial expectations. Retail, hospitality and workplace environments are particularly susceptible to refurbishment cycles in which functioning materials and furniture may be removed before the end of their technical life. In such circumstances, specifying an individual “green” product addresses only part of the environmental problem. A project cannot meaningfully progress towards circularity while simultaneously treating interiors as disposable environments. Extending material life, retaining existing components, designing for adaptability and enabling disassembly can therefore be as important as selecting newly manufactured products with environmental credentials.

Circularity challenges the conventional relationship between sustainability and consumption by shifting attention from identifying a preferable new product towards questioning whether a new product is required at all. Reuse, repair, refurbishment and adaptation can reduce demand for virgin resources while preserving material and embodied value already invested within existing interiors. Research examining circular approaches to Interior Design education and practice similarly emphasises reconsidering design processes and material lifecycles rather than simply substituting conventional products with supposedly greener alternatives (Whiting et al., 2023). A sustainability strategy centred exclusively on purchasing environmentally branded new products may therefore reproduce the consumption patterns it claims to improve.

Nevertheless, circularity should not itself become another simplified sustainability narrative. Retaining or reusing existing components can reduce demand for new resources, but its environmental value depends on their condition, safety, remaining service life, adaptability and the resources required for continued use. Designing for disassembly likewise does not guarantee future reuse if appropriate recovery systems, markets or organisational processes are absent. Circularity should therefore be evaluated as a practical system of material retention and recovery rather than communicated merely as an environmental intention.

The same critical approach applies to health and wellbeing. Low-emission materials, indoor air quality, daylight, acoustics and occupant comfort represent legitimate components of sustainable Interior Design, but environmental and health claims require credible information. Research into non-toxic material adoption in Interior Design has identified barriers involving material information, cost, availability, awareness and the capacity to make informed specification decisions (Chellappa et al., 2026). Inconsistent or promotional claims can make it difficult to distinguish genuinely healthier materials from those merely positioned as environmentally preferable. Environmental transparency therefore directly affects the designer's capacity to make informed specifications.

For Interior Designers, this creates an expanded professional responsibility. Designers operate between manufacturers, suppliers, consultants, clients, contractors and users, translating product information into decisions that may remain physically embedded within spaces for years. Accepting environmental terminology without investigation risks transferring unsubstantiated claims into professional specifications and subsequently into the environmental narrative of completed projects. Designers therefore require sufficient environmental literacy to ask critical questions: What exactly is being claimed? What evidence supports it? Which lifecycle stage does the claim address? Is certification independently verified? What relevant impacts are excluded? Can the product realistically be maintained, repaired, reused or recovered at end of life?

Yet professional responsibility must also be understood within the constraints of practice. Designers do not make environmental decisions in isolation; specification may be shaped by client budgets, procurement systems, contractor substitutions, product availability, project deadlines and access to reliable environmental information. Recognising these constraints does not remove professional responsibility, but it prevents greenwashing from being reduced to a problem of individual designer intention. The more difficult question is how environmental responsibility can be maintained when commercial and operational conditions favour cost, speed, availability or visual impact over longer-term environmental performance.

This tension becomes particularly important as sustainability contributes increasingly to the commercial identity of developments, hotels, workplaces, restaurants and residential projects. Environmental responsibility can add

reputational and market value, creating legitimate incentives for improved performance but also incentives to communicate sustainability selectively. Research within architecture and the wider construction sector consequently reinforces the importance of distinguishing environmental communication from substantiated environmental performance where sustainability forms part of the commercial representation of buildings, materials and projects (Erden and Öktem Erkartal, 2019, Moshood, Rotimi and Rotimi, 2024).

The challenge for Interior Design is therefore not to reject environmental communication, certification or sustainable materials, but to reconnect them with evidence, context and lifecycle consequences. A sustainable interior should not be defined by how successfully it communicates a green identity. Its environmental credibility should emerge from the decisions underlying the visible design: what was retained rather than demolished, what was sourced and from where, what evidence informed specification, how long materials are expected to remain in use, what impacts occur during occupation, and what can happen to those materials when the interior changes again.

Moving beyond greenwashing consequently requires a shift from sustainable appearance to environmental performance. Plants, natural materials, certification marks and environmental terminology can contribute to a sustainability narrative, but none should substitute for evidence. Within Interior Design, some of the most meaningful environmental decisions may ultimately be those that are least visually obvious: retaining an existing partition, avoiding unnecessary finishes, selecting durable low-emission materials, reducing replacement cycles or designing components for repair and reuse. Sustainability becomes credible when environmental responsibility is embedded within decision-making rather than applied as a visual identity after the design has already been determined.

The Cyprus Context: Sustainability Between Policy and Practice

Cyprus provides a distinctive setting for examining the relationship between sustainability communication and environmental accountability. As a European Union Member State, the country is increasingly influenced by European legislation concerning energy efficiency, circularity, environmental claims, consumer protection and the decarbonisation of the built environment. At the same time, sustainability must be implemented within the environmental, economic and material conditions of an island context. Climate, cooling demand, international material supply chains, established construction practices, development pressures and the importance of tourism and property development all influence how environmental ambitions are translated into professional practice. Greenwashing in Cyprus should therefore be understood not only as a question of misleading advertising, but as part of a wider tension between increasingly ambitious sustainability narratives and the evidence and implementation required to substantiate them.

The regulatory environment is becoming increasingly significant. In September 2026, the Cyprus Consumer Protection Service issued a practical guide for businesses and consumers concerning the Green Transition, placing particular emphasis on environmental claims, consumer protection and business obligations within the developing Cypriot and European legislative framework (Cyprus Consumer Protection Service, 2026). This represents an important development because environmental terminology can no longer be treated solely as voluntary promotional language. Claims concerning environmental performance increasingly intersect with consumer rights and commercial responsibility, requiring businesses to consider whether green claims can be demonstrated and whether the overall environmental impression communicated to consumers is justified.

This development is particularly relevant as Directive (EU) 2024/825 strengthens protection against unfair commercial practices associated with the green transition. Its implications extend to Cyprus through the wider European movement towards clearer environmental claims and more reliable sustainability labels. For designers, suppliers, developers and other actors within the built environment, expressions such as green, eco-friendly, environmentally friendly or sustainable cannot derive credibility simply from their familiarity. Their legitimacy increasingly depends on the environmental evidence and performance supporting them (European Parliament and Council of the European Union, 2024a).

Yet stronger regulation should not be interpreted as equivalent to stronger environmental performance. Regulation can establish minimum requirements, restrict misleading communication and create mechanisms for accountability, but it cannot determine how sustainability is interpreted within every design decision. Compliance demonstrates that particular requirements have been satisfied; it does not necessarily establish that the most environmentally responsible solution has been selected. Regulatory compliance can itself become part of a green

narrative when achievement against one requirement is communicated as evidence of broader sustainability than has actually been assessed. The critical issue is therefore not only whether regulation exists, but how its requirements are translated into practice and how accurately their environmental significance is communicated.

Cyprus is simultaneously experiencing a broader transformation in building-energy policy. The country's Draft National Building Renovation Plan, submitted in March 2026, establishes a strategic framework for transforming the national building stock towards high energy efficiency and decarbonisation by 2050, reflecting the requirements of the recast Energy Performance of Buildings Directive (Cyprus Energy Service, 2026, European Parliament and Council of the European Union, 2024b). These developments indicate that environmental performance within the built environment is progressively shifting from an optional design aspiration towards a more regulated and measurable field.

However, ambitious policy objectives do not automatically demonstrate implementation at project level. Long-term decarbonisation targets operate strategically, whereas environmental outcomes within individual interiors depend on decisions concerning specification, procurement, construction, operation, maintenance and eventual refurbishment. Policy can establish direction and expectations, but its environmental significance ultimately depends on how those ambitions influence everyday professional decisions. A critical evaluation of sustainability in Cyprus must therefore consider the potential distance between policy ambition, professional implementation and measurable outcomes.

For Interior Design, progress in building-energy regulation does not resolve the wider environmental impacts associated with interiors. Energy performance represents one component of sustainability, while designers make decisions concerning materials, finishes, furniture, lighting, refurbishment, maintenance and replacement. A project may satisfy building-energy requirements while still raising questions concerning embodied impacts, sourcing, waste, toxicity, durability and circularity. Compliance with one environmental requirement should therefore not automatically support a broad claim that an entire project is “sustainable”.

The climatic conditions of Cyprus reinforce this distinction. The warm Mediterranean climate and extended periods of high temperatures make cooling, solar control, building-envelope performance and energy-conscious design important considerations. Cyprus's evolving building-energy framework reflects the wider European transition towards improving existing and new buildings and progressively reducing building-related emissions (Cyprus Energy Service, 2026, European Parliament and Council of the European Union, 2024b). Yet improvements in operational efficiency may themselves require new materials, equipment and construction processes. Conversely, retaining existing components can conserve embodied resources while potentially limiting opportunities for improved operational performance. Neither position is automatically preferable. Environmental value depends on factors such as existing condition, anticipated service life, energy savings, material impacts and the duration over which benefits are realised. Sustainability therefore requires negotiation between operational and embodied impacts rather than assuming that improvement according to one indicator represents improvement across the whole lifecycle.

Material availability presents another important Cyprus-specific consideration. Within a relatively small island market, Interior Designers frequently operate through supply chains involving products and materials manufactured outside Cyprus. A product may carry recognised environmental certification but require long-distance transportation or prove difficult to repair, replace or recover locally. Conversely, locally available products may provide less comprehensive environmental documentation. Neither local nor imported materials should therefore be assigned environmental value solely according to geographical origin. Local availability may reduce some transportation impacts and support maintenance or replacement, but it does not automatically demonstrate responsible extraction, low embodied impact, durability or non-toxicity. Equally, an imported product may offer greater durability, stronger environmental documentation or substantially better performance. The critical question is not simply where a material comes from, but how provenance interacts with manufacturing, transportation, performance, service life, maintenance and eventual recovery.

Circularity raises similar questions. European sustainability policy increasingly emphasises extending product and material lifecycles, reducing waste and decreasing dependence on virgin resources. Within the Cypriot built environment, existing interiors frequently contain materials, furniture and components that retain functional value even when aesthetic preferences or commercial identities change. Replacing these elements with newly purchased “green” products can therefore be environmentally contradictory where retention, adaptation, repair or reuse remains feasible.

However, circularity also depends on the systems through which intentions become outcomes. Designing a material for reuse or specifying a theoretically recyclable product has limited environmental value if suitable recovery, collection, repair or secondary markets are unavailable at the end of its first use. This is particularly relevant within an island context, where strategies developed at European or international level may encounter different infrastructural and market conditions when implemented locally. Circularity should therefore be assessed not simply according to whether reuse or recycling is technically possible, but whether realistic pathways exist through which those outcomes can occur.

The hospitality and tourism context adds another dimension. Hotels, restaurants, leisure environments and other visitor-oriented interiors represent highly visible areas in which environmental responsibility, spatial identity and commercial communication intersect. Ideas of nature, wellbeing, locality and environmental responsibility are increasingly visible within hospitality design and can support genuine sustainability innovation where energy, water, materials, sourcing and waste are addressed systematically. Yet the commercial value of a green identity also makes substantiation essential. Extensive planting, natural materials and environmentally themed imagery should not automatically be interpreted as evidence of sustainable performance.

This creates a tension between sustainability as environmental performance and sustainability as market identity. The commercial value attached to environmentally responsible design can provide legitimate incentives for businesses to invest in environmental improvements; sustainability branding should therefore not automatically be interpreted as greenwashing. However, the same commercial value creates incentives to make positive environmental interventions highly visible while less favourable impacts remain less prominent. The critical issue is one of proportionality: whether the environmental identity communicated by a project accurately reflects the breadth and significance of the interventions undertaken.

This distinction is particularly relevant where Mediterranean vegetation, stone, timber, daylight and references to locality contribute strongly to architectural and tourism identity. Such qualities can enhance spatial character and connection to place, but they should not substitute for measurable environmental performance. A design can appear closely connected to nature while relying on resource-intensive construction or short refurbishment cycles. Conversely, a highly responsible interior may communicate sustainability less visibly because its most significant interventions involve retention, reduced material use, efficient systems and durable specification.

Professional environmental literacy consequently becomes central. Designers need to distinguish supplier marketing from verifiable product information, understand the relevance and limitations of certification, and evaluate environmental claims within local conditions. This does not require every Interior Designer to become an environmental engineer or certification specialist, but it does require sufficient knowledge to question claims, request supporting evidence and recognise when specialist advice is necessary.

Environmental literacy alone, however, cannot eliminate the gap between sustainability ambition and implementation. Designers operate within commercial systems in which environmental preferences may compete with client budgets, procurement constraints, project schedules, product availability and established construction practices. Greenwashing should therefore not be reduced to inadequate knowledge or unethical intention alone. Sustainability claims may become disconnected from outcomes through limited information, competing priorities and implementation constraints. The professional challenge is to make these limitations transparent rather than allowing compromise to disappear behind an unrestricted sustainability narrative.

Education also has an important role in supporting this transition. If future designers encounter sustainability primarily through visual examples or broad environmental principles, they may remain vulnerable to the same simplified claims encountered by consumers. Interior Design education in Cyprus can instead develop students' capacity to interrogate environmental information: where a product originates, what certification demonstrates, how long it is expected to last, whether it can be repaired, what happens at end of life and whether the environmental claim being made is proportionate to the available evidence. Sustainability literacy should therefore include greenwashing literacy, the ability not only to propose environmentally responsible solutions but also to recognise when environmental communication exceeds environmental evidence.

This educational responsibility extends beyond identifying misleading claims. If sustainability education presents environmental decisions as straightforward choices between “good” and “bad” materials, it risks reproducing the simplification that underpins greenwashing itself. Students should instead encounter conflicting evidence, incomplete information, economic constraints and environmental trade-offs requiring reasoned justification.

Greenwashing literacy therefore involves developing the capacity to determine how much environmental confidence the available evidence actually permits.

Cyprus is consequently positioned at an important point of transition. European and national policy are strengthening environmental expectations, building performance is becoming increasingly measurable, and consumer-protection guidance is placing greater attention on the credibility of environmental claims (Cyprus Consumer Protection Service, 2026, Cyprus Energy Service, 2026, European Parliament and Council of the European Union, 2024a, 2024b). Yet regulation alone cannot establish a meaningful sustainability culture, just as certification, environmental education or professional intention cannot independently guarantee environmental outcomes. The wider challenge is ensuring that these mechanisms operate together while acknowledging the practical limitations, trade-offs and uncertainties involved in translating sustainability from policy into practice.

For the Cypriot built environment, moving beyond greenwashing therefore requires alignment between policy, professional practice, environmental evidence and education. Sustainability cannot remain primarily a language through which projects are promoted after completion; it must become a process through which decisions are questioned before, during and after design. The credibility of a green claim should ultimately depend not on how convincingly sustainability is communicated, but on how transparently its environmental basis, limitations and eventual outcomes can be demonstrated.

Discussion: From Green Claims to Environmental Accountability

The preceding analysis demonstrates that greenwashing cannot be understood solely as the deliberate communication of false environmental information. Within the built environment, and particularly within Interior Design, sustainability may be communicated through terminology, imagery, certification, material selection and individual environmental interventions while wider environmental consequences remain insufficiently examined. Existing research similarly identifies selective disclosure, symbolic environmental communication and the disconnection between environmental claims and substantive environmental performance as important dimensions of greenwashing (Delmas and Burbano, 2011, Lyon and Montgomery, 2015, Santos et al., 2024). The central issue is therefore one of proportionality between what is claimed and what can be demonstrated.

This distinction is particularly relevant to Cyprus, where environmental expectations are developing alongside European regulation, consumer-protection requirements and increasing attention to built-environment performance (Cyprus Consumer Protection Service, 2026, Cyprus Energy Service, 2026). At the same time, implementation remains influenced by climatic, material, economic and professional conditions. Sustainability communication must therefore be interpreted not only according to what is environmentally desirable, but according to what can be evidenced and implemented within the context in which a project operates.

Based on the analysis developed throughout this article, this transition can be conceptualised through four interconnected stages: Claim → Evidence → Practice → Accountability. These stages do not constitute a certification system, quantitative assessment method or substitute for established environmental standards. Rather, they provide a conceptual framework for interrogating the relationship between sustainability communication and environmental responsibility. The framework shifts attention away from whether a project simply describes itself as sustainable and towards whether its environmental communication remains aligned with the evidence, decisions and outcomes supporting it.

Claim

Claim represents the first stage because environmental responsibility increasingly begins with language and representation. A product may be described as eco-friendly, a material as natural, an interior as green, or a development as sustainable. Such terminology is not inherently problematic; environmental claims can communicate legitimate improvements and support more informed choices. The difficulty arises when the scope of the language exceeds the scope of the evidence.

A claim concerning recycled content, for example, should not imply that the complete product has minimal environmental impact, just as vegetation or natural materials do not independently establish that an interior performs sustainably across energy, materials, waste, durability and lifecycle impacts. European regulation increasingly addresses generic environmental claims and overall environmental impressions that cannot be

adequately substantiated (European Parliament and Council of the European Union, 2024a). The first question should therefore be not whether a claim sounds environmentally positive, but what precisely is being claimed.

Evidence

Evidence requires environmental communication to be supported by information proportionate to the claim. This may include recognised certification, Environmental Product Declarations, lifecycle information, energy-performance data, material provenance, emissions information, recycled-content documentation or other independently verifiable sources. The growing European emphasis on substantiation reflects a wider transition away from generic environmental terminology towards claims supported by credible information (European Commission, 2023, European Parliament and Council of the European Union, 2024a).

For Interior Designers, this has significant professional implications. Designers frequently depend on information supplied by manufacturers, distributors and other members of the supply chain, while research has identified challenges involving environmental information, supplier transparency and verification within Interior Design practice (Payer, Buics and Eisingerné Balassa, 2026). Environmental literacy therefore includes the capacity to distinguish technical information from persuasive marketing and to question what a certification evaluates, whether information is independently verified, which lifecycle stages are represented and what relevant impacts remain outside the evidence provided. Environmental Product Declarations can support this process, although their value depends on the quality, transparency and interpretation of the data communicated (Moshood, Rotimi and Rotimi, 2024).

Evidence should nevertheless not be treated as complete or environmentally neutral. Different forms of evidence measure different aspects of performance and may exclude impacts relevant to the overall sustainability of a product or project. The critical function of evidence is therefore not to provide an automatic declaration of sustainability, but to establish how much environmental confidence a particular claim can reasonably support.

Practice

Evidence alone does not guarantee sustainable outcomes. Practice concerns whether environmental knowledge materially influences design decisions. Sustainability documentation can itself become symbolic when it exists separately from the process through which projects are conceived and delivered. A practice may possess environmental policies, specify certified materials or communicate sustainability commitments while continuing to prioritise unnecessary demolition, short replacement cycles or resource-intensive decisions.

For Interior Design, practice therefore extends beyond selecting products carrying environmental credentials. It involves questioning whether existing components can be retained, whether new material is necessary, whether furniture can be repaired or adapted, whether products are sufficiently durable and whether realistic recovery pathways exist at end of life. Such questions reposition sustainability from product selection towards design decision-making and challenge the assumption that environmentally responsible design necessarily requires purchasing new “sustainable” products. Circular approaches similarly emphasise reconsidering design processes, material lifecycles, reuse and resource consumption (Whiting et al., 2023).

Context remains essential. In Cyprus, international supply chains, product availability, transportation, maintenance, procurement and recovery infrastructure can influence whether an environmentally preferable option is practically achievable. Practice therefore exposes the tension between environmental ambition and professional feasibility. Technical evidence may identify one option as preferable, yet budgets, availability or performance requirements may constrain implementation. Conversely, practical constraints should not automatically legitimise environmentally weaker decisions. The critical challenge is to make these trade-offs explicit and ensure that decisions can be justified in relation to the evidence and context available.

Accountability

Accountability extends sustainability beyond specification or project completion. It asks whether stated environmental intentions were implemented, whether promised performance was achieved, whether products were substituted during construction, how spaces perform during occupation and what happens when an interior is eventually refurbished. This is particularly important because sustainability claims are often most visible when

a project is promoted or completed, while many environmental consequences emerge through subsequent occupation, maintenance, adaptation and replacement.

Accountability also changes how sustainability can be communicated. Rather than presenting sustainability as an absolute identity, this is a sustainable interior, professionals can communicate more precisely which impacts have been addressed, what evidence supports those interventions, which limitations remain and where further improvement is possible. Such transparency provides a more credible basis for environmental responsibility and positions sustainability as an ongoing process rather than a label attached to a completed aesthetic outcome.

Importantly, accountability also allows environmental outcomes to challenge assumptions made during design. Materials may perform differently from expectations, intended recovery pathways may not materialise, operational behaviour may alter anticipated performance, or products may be substituted during procurement and construction. Accountability should therefore not function solely as confirmation of success. It should enable unsuccessful assumptions, unintended consequences and limitations to inform subsequent decisions.

Connecting the Four Stages

The Claim → Evidence → Practice → Accountability framework identifies several points at which sustainability communication can become disconnected from environmental responsibility. A claim without evidence risks becoming unsupported communication; evidence without practice risks becoming documentation disconnected from meaningful change; and practice without accountability may produce interventions without sufficient understanding of whether anticipated outcomes were achieved.

However, the framework should not be interpreted as a simple linear progression in which movement through all four stages automatically produces sustainability. Evidence may remain incomplete, professional decisions may involve competing environmental priorities, and outcomes may differ from those anticipated during design. Accountability may consequently require earlier claims, evidence or practices to be reconsidered. The relationship between the four stages is therefore iterative rather than purely sequential. Credible sustainability depends not only on continuity between the stages, but on the willingness to revisit environmental decisions when evidence, context or outcomes reveal that previous assumptions were incomplete.

The framework also exposes the limitations of approaching greenwashing solely through consumer regulation. Directive (EU) 2024/825 represents an important development in strengthening consumer protection against misleading environmental communication (European Parliament and Council of the European Union, 2024a), but professional responsibility begins before a claim reaches the consumer. Interior Designers influence which products are specified, which manufacturer claims enter project documentation, which existing elements are retained or removed and how sustainability is represented to clients. Architects, engineers, suppliers, contractors, developers and certification specialists similarly contribute different forms of environmental knowledge and responsibility.

This distribution of responsibility can itself create vulnerability. As environmental information moves between manufacturers, suppliers, designers, consultants, contractors, developers and clients, responsibility for verification may become fragmented. Each actor may depend on information produced by another, while no single participant evaluates the complete evidential basis of the resulting environmental narrative. Greenwashing may therefore emerge not only through deliberate exaggeration but through fragmented responsibility across professional and supply-chain relationships. Addressing it requires both individual environmental literacy and clearer mechanisms for establishing who is responsible for verifying, communicating and accounting for environmental claims.

Education consequently becomes part of this professional transition. Future Interior Designers need not only sustainability knowledge but also the capacity to evaluate environmental claims critically. Greenwashing literacy should therefore form part of sustainability literacy. Students should learn to question environmental terminology, compare evidence, interpret certification and recognise the limitations of individual sustainability indicators. Rather than simply identifying a “sustainable material”, they can be required to justify why one option may be environmentally preferable, what evidence supports the decision, which trade-offs remain and how the solution responds to its specific context.

Such an approach also brings sustainability education closer to professional reality. Cost, availability, procurement, client expectations and technical feasibility should not be treated as reasons to abandon

environmental responsibility, but as part of the sustainability problem designers must learn to negotiate. The objective is not to produce an environmentally perfect solution under unrealistic conditions, but to make environmental decisions more explicit, evidence-based and defensible.

For Cyprus, this is particularly relevant as European sustainability requirements become increasingly embedded within national regulation and professional practice (Cyprus Consumer Protection Service, 2026, Cyprus Energy Service, 2026, European Parliament and Council of the European Union, 2024a, 2024b). The country's scale and context create both implementation challenges and opportunities for closer relationships between education, professional practice, suppliers and regulatory bodies. Universities can contribute sustainability research and environmental literacy; industry can provide knowledge of construction and procurement realities; suppliers can improve access to transparent product information; and policymakers can establish clearer expectations for environmental communication.

Nevertheless, the proposed framework has limitations. Claim → Evidence → Practice → Accountability does not determine which environmental trade-offs should be prioritised, establish quantitative thresholds for sustainability or replace specialist assessment methods such as LCA, certification or building-performance evaluation. Nor can it eliminate uncertainty where environmental data are incomplete or conflicting. Its value lies instead in making the relationship between environmental communication and environmental responsibility more explicit, requiring the basis of a claim, its translation into practice and its eventual consequences to remain open to scrutiny.

Greenwashing should therefore be addressed not only after misleading claims occur, but through a professional culture in which environmental evidence becomes integral to decision-making. The distinction between sustainability and greenwashing is not determined by how frequently environmental terminology appears within a project, but by the relationship between environmental intention, supporting evidence, implemented decisions and demonstrated outcomes.

For Interior Design in Cyprus, moving beyond greenwashing consequently requires sustainability to become less dependent on the visual performance of “greenness” and more dependent on the professional performance of environmental responsibility. Claim → Evidence → Practice → Accountability provides one way of framing this transition. It does not reduce every environmental decision to a single metric, nor suggest that certification alone can resolve the complexity of sustainability. Instead, it establishes a principle of transparency: the broader the environmental claim, the stronger and more comprehensive the evidence and practice required to support it.

In this sense, moving beyond greenwashing is not simply about communicating sustainability more effectively. It is about ensuring that there is sufficient environmental substance to communicate in the first place.

Conclusion: Beyond Greenwashing

The increasing prominence of sustainability within policy, professional practice and consumer culture represents an essential response to contemporary environmental challenges. Yet as sustainability becomes more commercially, socially and professionally valuable, the distinction between communicating environmental responsibility and demonstrating it becomes increasingly important. Greenwashing emerges within this distinction not only through explicitly false statements, but through vague terminology, selective disclosure, unsupported claims, visual representations and sustainability narratives that communicate more environmental value than the available evidence can substantiate.

Within the built environment and Interior Design, this challenge is particularly significant because environmental responsibility cannot be established through individual materials, visual characteristics, labels or certifications alone. Sustainability emerges from the wider consequences of design decisions across material sourcing, resource consumption, energy, durability, health and wellbeing, maintenance, adaptation, reuse and end-of-life conditions. Moving beyond greenwashing therefore requires a transition from the appearance and communication of sustainability towards evidence-based environmental decision-making.

For Cyprus, this transition is becoming increasingly relevant as European environmental policy, national regulation and consumer-protection requirements strengthen expectations for credible environmental communication. Yet environmental ambition must be translated through the specific climatic, material, economic and professional conditions of the Cypriot built environment. Environmental claims should therefore be evaluated contextually, recognising that certification, imported or local sourcing, circularity and regulatory compliance each

provide only part of a wider environmental assessment. The challenge is not simply to increase the visibility of sustainability, but to ensure that environmental claims remain proportionate to what can realistically be evidenced, implemented and achieved.

This article proposes Claim → Evidence → Practice → Accountability as a conceptual framework for examining this relationship. The framework shifts attention from sustainability as an environmental identity towards the continuity between what is communicated, what can be substantiated, how environmental knowledge influences professional decisions and whether intended outcomes remain open to evaluation. It does not replace established environmental assessment methods, certification systems or regulatory requirements, nor does it determine which environmental trade-offs should be prioritised. Rather, its contribution lies in providing a critical structure through which the alignment between sustainability communication and environmental responsibility can be interrogated.

This perspective has implications for both professional practice and education. Interior Designers increasingly require the environmental literacy to interrogate manufacturer information, understand the scope and limitations of certification, compare alternatives and communicate environmental decisions transparently. Equally, sustainability education should incorporate greenwashing literacy, enabling future professionals to distinguish between environmental appearance, environmental claims and substantiated environmental performance while recognising the trade-offs and uncertainties involved in real design decisions.

Addressing greenwashing does not therefore require abandoning sustainability communication. It requires making that communication more precise, transparent and accountable. Environmental responsibility should not be inferred because a project contains plants, natural materials, certified products or persuasive environmental imagery, nor should regulatory compliance alone be expanded into an unrestricted claim of sustainability. Credibility instead depends upon maintaining a defensible relationship between environmental intention, supporting evidence, implemented decisions and eventual outcomes.

For Cyprus, moving beyond greenwashing represents both a professional challenge and an opportunity to strengthen the credibility of environmental practice. As sustainability expectations continue to develop, the built-environment professions can move from communicating sustainability primarily as an aspiration towards demonstrating it through evidence, implementation and accountability. The credibility of a sustainable future will depend not on how convincingly projects appear green, but on whether their environmental claims can withstand scrutiny. Sustainability gains meaning when what is claimed, what is evidenced, what is practised and what is ultimately achieved remain aligned.

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