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Greenwashing in CSR: Implications for Environmental Sustainability

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Abstract

In the last two decades, corporate social responsibility has increased exponentially; however, the degradation of the environment has also increased exponentially. This has raised more questions about the true effectiveness of corporate sustainability. This study aims to examine if organizations that practice greenwashing can reduce the environmental benefits that companies achieve by participating in corporate social responsibility activities. This study will be conducted by using literature review methods to examine the gap between organizational environmental communication and actual organizational environmental performance by using existing research studies. The results have shown that companies are more likely to engage in greenwashing by promoting organizational environmental performance without making equal investments in organizational performance. This has shown that companies are more likely to engage in providing false sustainability reports rather than engaging in actual organizational sustainability. Greenwashing has significant impacts on organizations that include reduced innovation in the environment and reduced investor and consumer trust in organizational sustainability. Through synthesizing existing literature, the study indicates that there is an increased need to consider the relationship between corporate claims and tangible environmental performance in order to sustain CSR legitimacy. Additionally, it offers policy implications by focusing on the need to improve transparency and disclosure standards in order to improve the efficacy of CSR in attaining environmental protection objectives.

Keywords

CSR, Environmental Performance, Greenwashing, Legitimacy Theory, Stakeholder Trust, Sustainability.

INTRODUCTION

In recent years, Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR) has caught the attention significantly, as depicted in the works of [1] [2] and [3]. This interest has been around since the 1960s, when thinkers such as [4] first highlighted the point that businesses, despite being economically focused, have a significant impact on society. Today, visionary businesses integrate CSR into their core strategies and see it as a means of creating a positive impact on society, as [5] emphasized, where businesses use their skills and capabilities to preserve the earth for coming generations.

However, such a positive view has a critical challenge: the rise of corporate deception. [6] pointed out the prevalence of false claims regarding environmental and social activities, which has caused concern among activists that such claims are merely a mask for failure [7]. Companies are developing their image for important target groups: consumers, shareholders, governments, and local communities, often to mask weaknesses, build a reputation, or gain a competitive advantage. At the heart of such a problem is greenwashing, which has no single definition despite different meanings attributed to it [8] [9] but it is generally understood as false claims related to environmental activities.

However, the term "greenwashing" did not originate in academic journals. It was popularized by environmental activist Jay Westerveld in 1986 when he used the term to criticize the practice of hotels encouraging customers to reuse towels as a form of "environmentalism" when in reality it only helped the hotel save money on laundry [10]. Serious academic interest in the phenomenon began in the late 1990s when [11] related it to "false claims of social accountability."

The idea has been on the rise since after 2007, when most countries began demanding CSR reporting, according to [1] who emphasize the interest in greenwashing, especially after the global financial crisis, as research on this topic has grown substantially over time. Today, greenwashing takes many shapes, from companies concealing their overall pollution, using "fake eco-labels" on their products, or being accused by NGOs, revealing the truth [8].

This is a reflection of a condition in which companies advertise green initiatives while their practices are the exact opposite of what they are saying, thus a disconnect between sustainability communications and environmental performance [12]. This is a clear case of greenwashing, a disconnect between CSR communications and environmental performance [12]. According to [12] it is simply "when firms communicate positive environmental messages while their actual environmental performance is poor, thereby creating a 'rhetoric-reality gap.'" In simpler terms, [1] define greenwashing as "any communication that misleads stakeholders about a company's environmental practices." [13] also describe it as symbolic posturing, which they define as "a lot of talk about sustainability without much actual action. "Whether it is "sharing good news while hiding bad news" [14] or "green talk without green walk" [15] greenwashing reduces CSR communications to a level of hypocrisy.

According to the studies conducted by [16] [17] and [18] companies practice greenwashing with the aim of seeking legitimacy, which is the trust required for long-term relations with stakeholders [13]. By managing perceptions through the use of selective information, companies seek credibility, which increases when there is congruence between the company's action and expectation [20] [21].

This paper seeks to bridge the gap between the promise of CSR and the reality of environmental issues. Through the systematic review of the most recent and relevant literature, this study seeks the following objectives:

- To examine the concept of greenwashing in the context of CSR and its effects on stakeholders' trust.
- To examine the damage that can be measured as a result of the practice of greenwashing.

LITERATURE REVIEW

CSR research constantly reveals companies pledging more environment friendly action than they actually perform [5]. This review clears what greenwashing means and tracks how it prevents real environmental progress, drawing from key studies across legitimacy theory, stakeholder reactions, and exposure impacts.

Greenwashing: CSR's Deceptive Environmental Claims

The term "greenwashing" describes the phenomenon of firms using communication that presents a positive environmental image but is not substantiated by their environmental performance. This involves the practice of "misleading, exaggerating, and selective reporting of environmental information," which enables firms to appear environmentally friendly but are not really so in practice [12] [1]. In essence, therefore, "greenwashing" represents the dichotomy of symbolic communication and substantive action whereby firms engage in sustainability communication but do not undertake the corresponding environmental improvements [13]. In practice, firms tend to present positive information by hiding the adverse effects of their operations, which is commonly referred to as "green talk without green walk" [15]. This minimizes the credibility of corporate communication on environmental issues and makes stakeholders believe that the communication is over-stated and insincere [18] [14] [8].

The sustainability of greenwashing practices could be further comprehended by drawing on theoretical frameworks. The signaling theory implies that companies utilize environmental reporting to shape perceptions by stakeholders, but when not backed by actual practice, credibility gaps are created [19]. Legitimacy theory further implies that companies are engaged in this practice because of their desire for social acceptance, even when their efforts are not significant in addressing environmental concerns [20]. Moreover, gaps have been identified in the credibility of CSR reporting, implying a disconnect between what is being reported and actual practice [21].

Additionally, organizational and market factors also influence greenwashing. Leadership styles, especially those based on control and image, have been associated with the likelihood of symbolic sustainability practices [17]. Firms can also use greenwashing strategically to attain market legitimacy and gain competitive advantage [16]. In addition, symbolic greenwashing practices can heighten the perceived hypocrisy of businesses [3].

Industry-specific trends also show that environmentally sensitive industries are more likely to engage in such practices. Companies in such industries use symbolic disclosures to deal with stakeholder perceptions without actually improving environmental performance [22] [23] [24]. Such practices are also supported by stakeholder theory, where marketing communications play a major role in building brand images; however, the disconnect between messages and actions ultimately leads to a loss of trust [25] [26] [9] [27].

From a broader perspective, it is argued that greenwashing signifies a transition from CSR as a force for societal advancement to CSR as a tool of impression management. Indeed, CSR was initially intended as a force for sustainable development, as argued by [5]. Nevertheless, the increase in misleading environmental practices has led to a situation where CSR is no longer effective. Past concerns about the emergence of non-financial misrepresentation, as argued by [4] and [6] indicate its longevity.

From the synthesis of the literature, it appears that the concept of greenwashing is multifaceted. Overall, it can be seen that the concept of greenwashing is multifaceted. This synthesis has provided a foundation upon which the impact of such practices, which do not only affect corporate legitimacy but also impact the environment as a whole, can be understood.

Table 1. Summary of 20 Key Scholarly Greenwashing Definitions in CSR Context

S.N.	Author(s) & Year	Exact Definition from Original Paper	Core Conceptual Framework
1	[12]	"Greenwashing is the act of misleading consumers regarding the environmental practices of a company (firm-level greenwashing) or the environmental benefits of a product or service"	Firm/Product-Level Deception
2	[1]	"Any form of marketing or PR that misleads consumers into believing that a company's products, practices, or technology are more environmentally friendly than they actually are"	Consumer Misrepresentation
3	[8]	"Greenwashing as the co-creation of a discrepant ecological image through organisational communication and external stakeholder accusations"	Image-Accusation Dynamics

S.N.	Author(s) & Year	Exact Definition from Original Paper	Core Conceptual Framework
4	[13]	"Environmental communication that lacks substantive environmental initiatives - symbolic rather than substantive action"	Symbolic vs Substantive Gap
5	[18]	"Corporate environmental communication perceived as 'hot air' - rhetorical rather than substantive"	Perception of Emptiness
6	[14]	"Greenwash occurs when firms selectively disclose positive environmental information while concealing negative information"	Selective Disclosure Strategy
7	[15]	"'Green talk without green walk' - environmental policy claims not matched by implementation"	Implementation Failure
8	[11]	"Socially desirable but unsubstantiated claims about organisational conduct"	Unsubstantiated Claims
9	[16]	"How the market values greenwashing - positive market reaction to environmental information that later proves misleading"	Market Valuation Effect
10	[17]	"Environmental claims disconnected from actual performance under authoritative leadership"	Leadership-Performance Disconnect
11	[23]	"Symbolic CSR disclosures that reduce perceptions of environmental liability without performance improvement"	Liability Perception Management
12	[3]	"Corporate hypocrisy from proactive CSR pledges before substantive action"	Hypocrisy Amplification
13	[19]	"Positive environmental signals despite poor performance - signalling theory failure"	Signal-Performance Mismatch
14	[22]	"Increased environmental disclosure by poor performers in environmentally sensitive industries"	Poor Performer Compensation
15	[25]	"Perceived greenwashing from green advertising contradicting corporate performance"	Advertising-Performance Contradiction
16	[26]	"Greenwashing behaviour leading to brand trust crisis through promise-performance gap"	Trust Erosion Pathway
17	[9]	"Consumer perception shifts after environmental scandal exposure"	Post-Scandal Reassessment
18	[28]	"Antecedents of greenwashing through authoritative leadership structures"	Leadership as Greenwashing Driver
19	[24]	"'Semantic greenwashing' - misleading environmental communication post-scandal"	Post-Crisis Deception
20	[29]	"Selective structured disclosure creating greenwashing through omission"	Strategic Information Omission

Source: Compiled by the Author

Greenwashing's Real Damage to Environmental Protection

Greenwashing not only deceives stakeholders, but it also diverts attention and efforts away from actual environmental activities, thus creating a greater gap between the company's claims and its actual performance [16]. Therefore, once the truth is revealed, the company might lose credibility and trust, which might restrict its potential for environmental activities. In most cases, the company might be more focused on promoting its environmental image rather than actually engaging in environmental activities, which might be influenced by the company's decision-making processes [17].

In such environmentally sensitive industries, the consequences of greenwashing are more critical. According to research findings, symbolic environmental disclosures have a positive impact on creating a favourable public image without any tangible improvement in environmental performance [23]. On the contrary, companies with poor environmental performance often use symbolic communication to mask adverse environmental impacts [22]

[15]. In the end, these practices lead to a lack of trust among stakeholders when companies make exaggerated claims of environmental performance without any tangible evidence of implementation [3] [13].

The impact of greenwashing is also seen in the field of environmental innovation. Companies that practice greenwashing have lower levels of commitment towards research and development in the field of sustainability [19]. The increased pressure of stakeholders and other external groups also reveals the gaps in corporate legitimacy [30]. In addition, the overall prevalence of greenwashing also results in a lack of trust among stakeholders due to their cautious and suspicious nature towards corporate sustainability claims [18] [31] [32] [33].

From a theoretical point of view, the continuation of greenwashing is explained by various structural and communication-related aspects. Research indicates the role of accusations by stakeholders on perceptions [8] as well as the role of weak regulatory frameworks in the continuation of such practices [12]. From the point of view of ethics in communication, such practices of making false environmental claims violate the fundamental norms of truth and transparency [34]. Moreover, aspects related to the credibility of CSR reports also emphasize the gap between corporate communication and performance [35]. Recent studies have also revealed the impact of such practices of misleading on consumer attitudes [36] [37].

In all, it must be said that greenwashing generates a vicious cycle wherein short-term benefits come at a cost of long-term harm, not only to the environment but also to institutions themselves, thus diluting the overall purpose of CSR as a tool for environmental protection, as argued by [38] [39] and [40].

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

This study has been conducted based on the literature review approach to comprehend the notion of greenwashing as well as its effect on environmental protection under the umbrella of Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR). It has been conducted by analyzing the existing literature on the topic of greenwashing and its impact on environmental protection. It has not been conducted by collecting data from primary sources but by analyzing the literature to identify the gap between corporate claims and real environmental actions in an effective and clear manner. It has been conducted by applying a thematic approach to organize the literature under major heads such as definitions of greenwashing, reasons for greenwashing, and impact of greenwashing on stakeholders and environmental protection. It has been conducted by applying a qualitative synthesis approach to interpret the literature on the topic of greenwashing and its impact on environmental protection.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The results of the research show that greenwashing has a strong impact on the actual intention of Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR). Rather than using the resources of CSR for actual environmental protection, many companies use symbolic communication approaches that lead to a perception of sustainability without any actual improvement in the environment. Even though it has short-term positive effects on the image of a company, it has negative long-term results. Once inconsistencies are recognized between the claims of a company and its actual performance, trust of stakeholders is reduced, legitimacy of a company is reduced, and market sanctions are applied.

To comprehend how this happens, the general mechanism of greenwashing is represented in Figure 1.

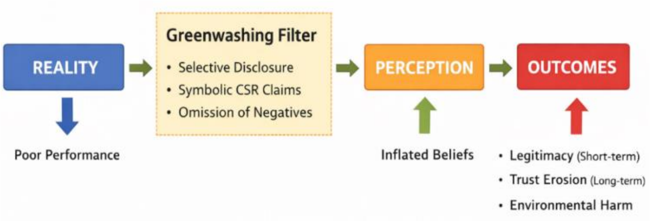

Figure 1
Source: [41] [13]

Figure 1 shows how companies process complex environmental information through communication. Companies do not communicate environmental strengths and weaknesses openly but focus on the positive while hiding their environmental weaknesses. This leads to temporarily improved stakeholder perceptions. Nevertheless, when the difference between perceptions and reality becomes apparent, legitimacy declines and environmental performance is negatively impacted.

Theoretical Explanation of Greenwashing

The sustainability of greenwashing practices can be understood through various theories. The legitimacy theory argues that firms always strive to seek legitimacy in order to ensure their survival and access to resources. As Mark Suchman argues, firms always strive to look appropriate in the eyes of society. When firms are faced with increasing environmental challenges, they may resort to greenwashing to maintain legitimacy rather than improving performance.

The signalling theory helps us understand that sustainability reports act as signals to stakeholders. According to [42] signals must be credible in order to remain effective. When firms overstate environmental performance compared to actual performance, credibility disappears.

From the communication ethics point of view, Jürgen Habermas claims that in the context of communication, truthfulness and sincerity must be present for there to be a dialogue. However, in the case of greenwashing, there is a deliberate exaggeration of the company's performance. In addition, the stakeholder theory, as proposed by [43] explains the management of powerful stakeholders by the company. This includes the selective reporting of information to these stakeholders.

The various types of greenwashing behavior can be explained as follows.

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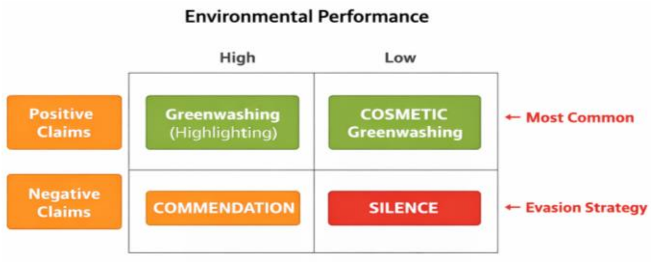

Figure 2. Types of Greenwashing Behaviour
Source: Adopted from [1]

In Figure 2, Actual environmental performance is compared with the nature of environmental communication. Figure 2 above illustrates that greenwashing does not happen in terms of false information alone; it could also happen in terms of highlighting positive information alone or hiding negative information alone or even silence alone. Thus, greenwashing happens on a spectrum from cosmetic exaggeration to misrepresentation alone.

Environmental and Legitimacy Consequences

The study reveals that greenwashing has environmental consequences. Firstly, it siphons resources meant for environmental investments to advertising and branding. This means there is reduced spending on renewable energies and conservation. Secondly, greenwashing impedes environmental innovation. When caught in the act of greenwashing, companies reduce their green R&D, and as a result, there is limited innovation in green technologies. Lastly, greenwashing increases stakeholder skepticism. When the general public becomes accustomed to greenwashing, they begin to question the legitimacy of every company in the market. This skepticism undermines the legitimacy of every company and the general support for climate change policies. The mechanism through which legitimacy is reduced can be explained as follows.

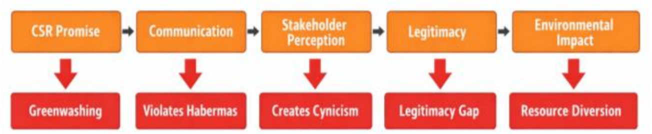

Figure 3. Greenwashing and Legitimacy Erosion Process
Source: Deceptive communication [8] → perception gaps [18] → legitimacy erosion [30]

As shown in Figure 3, perception gaps are created when exaggerated claims of CSR are made. When inconsistencies are recognized by stakeholders, cynicism emerges. This results in a decline in legitimacy and stakeholder trust, ultimately harming environmental outcomes. Thus, it is clear that greenwashing does not only impact companies' reputations but also harms environmental outcomes in the long term.

The Cumulative Effect of Such Environmental Degradation Caused by Greenwashing Practices Can be Visualized as Shown Below

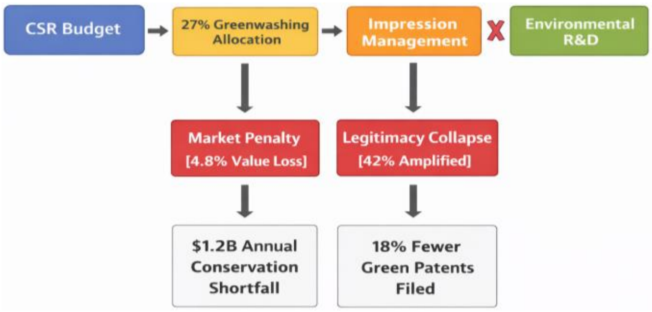

Figure 4: Impact of Greenwashing on Environmental Outcomes
Source: [8] [5]

As shown in Figure 4, greenwashing causes a diversion of resources away from CSR activities, thereby resulting in a decline in environmental R&D and a lack of innovation in the field of environmental conservation. This results in a vicious cycle of greenwashing causing a lack of innovation in the field of environmental conservation.

POLICY IMPLICATIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

The results underscore the necessity of developing more robust accountability systems. Corporations must develop performance-oriented disclosure approaches that provide evidence of environmental claims through performance results and verification. The approach to communication must be "substance first, promotion later," which helps to avoid credibility risks.

Regulators must enforce stricter disclosure norms and impose sanctions against companies that make false environmental claims. The use of verification systems helps to eliminate information asymmetry. Investors must also consider the risk of 'greenwashing' in ESG evaluation models.

In the case of India, the legal requirement for CSR investments is governed by the Companies Act of 2013. Although such a framework provides a substantial amount of financial resources for sustainability, a lack of monitoring practices could lead to symbolic compliance. Enhancing verification practices and linking CSR investments with environmental objectives will ensure the highest possible environmental returns.

In conclusion, to combat greenwashing practices, it is important that all parties, including businesses and investors, work together to ensure accountability. CSR investments could otherwise be a communication tool rather than a sustainability tool.

CONCLUSION

The present study reveals that greenwashing practices have a profound impact on the fundamental nature of CSR, transforming it from an instrument of genuine environmental protection to an instrument of image management. While firms reap the benefits of greenwashing in the short term, in the long term, such practices have negative consequences for the legitimacy of firms and the overall environmental governance structure.

The results have shown quite clearly that the crux of the matter is the mismatch between corporate sustainability reporting and actual environmental achievements. When corporate reporting becomes a symbol rather than a reality, CSR no longer has its intended role as a tool for promoting sustainable development. Rather, it becomes a tool for impression management, thus diluting its overall value.

In addition, greenwashing practices lead to structural inefficiencies because resources are being wasted on activities other than actual initiatives for improving environmental sustainability. This not only hampers the speed of environmental innovations but also contributes to the overall scepticism of stakeholders, including investors, consumers, and regulatory authorities. This, in turn, contributes to a lack of faith in institutions and the overall effectiveness of CSR strategies.

Under this premise, the paper also underscores the need for a strong correlation between communication and performance to ensure that the credibility of CSR is restored. In this regard, transparency, standardized disclosure systems, third-party verification, and stronger government regulation are essential to reduce the scope of "greenwashing." Furthermore, a "substance-first" approach must also be adopted by corporations wherein "environmental performance precedes communication."

To conclude, it is imperative to highlight the need to address the issue of greenwashing not only from a stakeholder perspective but also from a perspective that underscores the need for CSR to play its part in promoting long-term environmental sustainability.

FUTURE SCOPE OF THE STUDY

The future research may also use empirical and quantitative analysis to examine the direct impact of greenwashing on environmental performance and firm value. Moreover, comparative research will enable a deeper understanding of the effectiveness of regulation and sector-specific greenwashing practices.

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