

RESEARCH ARTICLE

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Presenting a Paradigm Model of Green Washing based on the Grounded Theory Approach

Mahsa Jandaghi ¹, Mahmud Naderi Beni ^{2*}**Abstract**

Greenwashing is considered as a deliberate and conscious deception of the consumer in relation to the environmental activities of an organization or the environmental benefits of a product, which has adverse consequences for various groups, including consumers, stakeholders and the environment, therefore, the purpose of this article was to analyze the different angles of greenwashing in the real context of the companies active in the dairy industry, as well as to identify and explain this phenomenon. The philosophy of this research is interpretive, its approach is qualitative, and the strategy used is grounded theory based on the emergent approach. The studied community included managers and activists of the dairy industry and related organizations, 15 of whom were selected through purposive sampling until reaching theoretical saturation, and the research data was collected through semi-structured interviews. In order to check the strength of the research, the four criteria of reliability, transferability, reliability and verifiability have been used. The relevant data analysis has been done using MAXQDA software and open, central and selective coding processes, and during continuous comparison, 427 codes, 27 concepts, 11 categories and 2 categories have been obtained. which has led to the emergence of the final model of research around the central category under the title of "companies greenwashing actions" model. The mentioned model includes the causes and results related to the central category of the research. In general, this study, by explaining the greenwashing measures theory, has provided the necessary platform for understanding this category of measures as well as their control and prevention.

Keywords: *Greenwashing, Green Marketing, Corporate Social Responsibility, Dairy Industry, Grounded Theory*

Introduction

With the growth of environmental challenges and competition in today's foggy and complex environment, companies are looking for different solutions to maintain and communicate with customers. Also, following the intensification of environmental pollution in the 21st century, environmental protection has become one of the concerns of consumers. In this regard, the focus of modern businesses

is based on sustainability, corporate social responsibility and green actions. Social responsibility encourages companies to work to improve the environment and use less energy and materials and waste management (Hajihassani et al., 2021). Also, organizations are responsible to their shareholders and have a responsibility to achieve their business and development goals (Sirafi Nafis et al., 2022).

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On the other hand, companies are trying to move towards sustainable performance and sustainable development in order to react and respond to the intensified concerns in the field of social and environmental issues that originate from unstable conditions (Hurth & Whittlesea, 2017). Therefore, companies have started publishing reports titled "Sustainability Report" by presenting sustainability programs. Companies focus in these reports on three main social, environmental and economic dimensions (Reutlinger, 2012). However, in the meantime, greenwashed companies are operating without improvement in their respective activities, only in pursuit of gaining fame, improving their image, and attracting the attention and support of green consumers who are aware of environmental issues and in their sustainability reports, they use unsupported and unsubstantiated environmental claims (Dahl & Bakalarska, 2018). Companies that spend more money, time and effort marketing their products as "green" instead of actually trying to reduce the negative environmental effects of their products and production processes, as companies those with greenwashed activities are known. The emergence of the phenomenon of greenwashing causes an increase in mistrust and doubt that at least some companies or organizations creatively manage their reputation and credit among the people and the financial community. They hide themselves and make the nature of the problem or their claims ambiguous (Laufer, 2003). Since no research has been done in this field in Iran and foreign researches have only focused on some of the causes or consequences of the greenwashing phenomenon, and on the other hand, greenwashing is also seen abundantly in Iranian companies; Therefore, it seems that there are causes and consequences for greenwashing actions in Iran, which are specific to the culture and society of Iranian companies. Therefore, it is necessary and important to study such actions in the native

environment of Iran. Therefore, the central and main question of this research is, what is the concept of greenwashing measures and what are its causes and consequences in the companies active in the dairy industry of Razavi Khorasan?

Literature Review

The discussion about the greenwashing phenomenon was raised for the first time in the mid-1960s following the growth of attention to the environment, and with the luck of the environmental movement, the phenomenon of false and misleading environmental reports both in operations and in business strategy. This phenomenon was first defined in 1972 by former advertising executive Jerry Mander as "eco-pornography". The phenomenon of greenwashing has been widely known since the mid-1980s. This concept emerged in order to describe exploitative actions or exaggerating sustainability claims to gain market share (Dahl, 2010). Jay Westervelt, a biologist and environmental activist from New York, was the first person to use the term greenwashing. In 1986, he published an article in the hotel industry about methods and measures to reuse towels (Guo et al., 2018; Wolniak & Habek, 2015) and interpreted the purpose of reusing towels in hotels as saving hoteliers in costs, not protecting the environment by reducing water consumption. Academic studies on greenwashing began in the mid-1990s, when Greer & Bruno (1996) discussed this phenomenon in their book *Environmental Marketing* (Laufer, 2003). Also, the results of the studies show the increasing attention of researchers to investigate the causes and consequences of the occurrence of greenwashing in order to identify and prevent this category of actions of companies (Jandaghi et al., 2022). The appearance of this term causes an increase in mistrust and doubt that at least some companies or organizations creatively manage their reputation and credit among people and

the financial community. They hide their mistake and make the nature of the problem or their claims ambiguous (Laufer, 2003). Greenwashing is derived from the term "environmental Whitewash", which is a negative term and implies the deception of the company (Karlner, 1997). Greenwashing is also known as Eco-Whitening, Whitewash, Eco-Washing, Eco-Bleaching and Green Sheen, which is a type of advertising in green marketing and is deception promotes the image of products, goals or policies of an organization that are its environmental reputation to increase benefits (Kahle & Gurel-Atay, 2015; Mayrand & Trottier, 2011; Kärnä et al., 2003; Bruno, 1997; Beder & Beder, 2002 & Badie, 2009) and on the other hand, misinformation as a type of wrong information from an organization that seeks to improve and restore its credibility and public reputation and shape its public image is understood. Therefore, it can be said that greenwashing is actions to mislead the consumer about the environmental operations or the benefits of the environmental product (service) (Lyon & Montgomery, 2015), that this phenomenon has become a "Persuasion Game" in which positive information about environmental or social performance is selectively disclosed and negative information about creating an overly positive image of the company remains hidden and disclosed (Lyon & Maxwell, 2011). Research on greenwashing increased in the late 2000s after a significant increase in green advertising between 2006 and 2009 (TerraChoice, 2010), and as a result, reports and regulatory discussions about such actions and practices. was doubled (Parguel et al., 2011). Therefore, the literature related to greenwashing has developed significantly (Seele & Gatti, 2017) and most studies examine this phenomenon in the field of corporate social responsibility (Parguel et al., 2011; Bazillier & Vauday, 2009). However, very limited research has been done on the analysis of greenwashing effects (De Jong et

al., 2018). According to the research conducted by the researcher, no research has been done in the field of greenwashing in the country. There have been scattered studies in the field of greenwashing outside of Iran, none of which have provided a comprehensive model of this phenomenon, but only one or two factors affecting greenwashing or the effects and consequences of this phenomenon have been limited. For example, a study was conducted in 2021 with the aim of investigating the effects of greenwashing on the green buying behavior of consumers through the image of the green brand, love and interest in the green brand, and loyalty to the green brand. The results of this research have shown that greenwashing has a negative effect on green purchasing behavior directly and indirectly (through the mentioned mediating variables) (Hameed et al., 2021). Kinnunen (2020) has also conducted research on the effects of greenwashing on consumer behavior. The results of this research indicate that greenwashing has a positive effect on green consumer confusion and perceived green risk by the consumer, and has a negative effect on green trust. On the other hand, confusion and perceived risk have negative effects on green trust. In 2020, Tahir, Athar and Afzal collected the opinions of 520 people from the agricultural input industry of Pakistan in a study entitled "The impact of greenwashing practices on green employee behavior: Mediating role of employee value orientation and green psychological climate" and analyzed the data with using structural equation modeling, they found that greenwashing has a negative effect on the behavior of green employees, both directly and indirectly, with the mediating role of employees' value orientation and green psychological climate. Mangini, Amaral, Conejero, & Pires conducted a study in 2020 with the aim of analyzing greenwashing as a predictive variable for consumer confusion and trust and how these two variables affect intention. They

have made a purchase. The data required for the aforementioned quantitative research was collected from 146 consumers of brands that had developed green marketing and had shown the consumers that they were compatible with the environment both in the brand and in their packaging has been presented and evaluated by structural equation modeling. The results of this research emphasize the importance of consumer confusion and trust and indicate that if the consumer understands greenwashing, he will not be inclined to trust the product or brand. Szabo & Webster (2020) in their research titled "Perceived greenwashing: the effects of green marketing on environmental and product perceptions" collected data to investigate the impact of consumer beliefs towards environmental issues on the perception greenwashing, the effect of greenwashing on environmental perceptions (including green value and green risk) and the effect of greenwashing on product perceptions (including brand characteristics and purchase intention) have been collected. The output of this study after analysis with structural equation modeling and AMOS software has shown that the consumer's beliefs about environmental issues are effective on his perception of greenwashing. Also, greenwashing has an effect on consumer perceptions about the product and environmental issues. Research was conducted in 2020 in order to show the power of greenwashing on purchase intention among today's buyers in Indonesia by Fitrianingrum and Celsya. For this purpose, through an online survey, 195 questionnaires were collected from mineral water consumers (as an environmentally friendly product) and by using structural equation modeling, the effect of greenwashing on brand credibility and purchase intention (direct effect) and also, the effect of greenwashing on the special value of the green brand through brand credibility (indirect effect) has been confirmed.

Research Methodology

The philosophy of this research is interpretive and its approach is qualitative, which was carried out using the grounded theory strategy based on the Glaser approach. During this study, managers and activists of Khorasan Razavi dairy industry are considered as society. Based on purposeful sampling and on the basis of education, experience and other criteria that show their rich information in the field under investigation of this research, 15 of the mentioned people were interviewed until theoretical saturation was reached. Semi-structured interview has been used as a data collection tool. In order to check the strength of the research, the four criteria of reliability, transferability, reliability and verifiability have been used. This study was conducted between 1400 and 1401, and the desired data was collected in a period of 5 months. In general, the emerging approach in grounded theory theoretical methodology is achieved by passing through 3 main steps of coding including open coding, selective coding and theoretical coding. The current research also sought to achieve its goals by going through the three main steps mentioned, while MAXQDA software was used to code the data. In the next section, in addition to presenting the findings, the method of coding in each step is described.

Research Findings

Data coding in the grounded theory method based on the Glaserian approach, as mentioned earlier, is done in three stages: 1. open coding; 2. selective coding and 3. theoretical coding. In the following, the mentioned steps are explained and the results are presented.

First step: open coding

At this stage, after the implementation of the interviews, line-by-line coding was done. In this regard, in order to extract important sentences from the text of the interviews and specify the primary codes, important concepts

were highlighted in the text. In this step, 427 primary codes were identified. An example of the identified codes can be seen in Table 1.

were formed and a suitable title was considered for each. A part of the coding done in this step is presented in Table 1.

Second step: selective coding

During the second step, selective coding, after merging similar primary codes, 11 classes

Table 1

Open, selective and theoretical coding process

Theoretical coding	Open and selective coding		
The naming of categories	Classes	Concepts	Examples of primary codes
Causes	Organizational factors	Financial factors	Increase in final price for the consumer
			Not having enough budget to green the product
		Non-financial factors	High price of raw materials
			Maintaining survival in the market and industry
	Legal-regulatory factors	Legal and regulatory factors in the industry	Maintain market share
			Companies focus on green product advertising
			Being the same owner and manager
		Legal and regulatory factors outside the industry	Existence of limited requirements for industrial production process pollution
			Lack of environmental standards in the industrial sector
			Legal pressures of regulatory organizations
			Lack of supervision of green products in non-industrial sector
Economic factors	National factors	Lack of environmental standards in non-industrial sector	
		Lack of approval and license in the non-industrial sector	
	International factors	Allocation of subsidies for green marketing	
		Financial problems	
			Unhealthy economic conditions
			Existence of international sanctions and pressures

Third step: theoretical coding

In the final stage, theoretical codes are obtained by combining abstract models of categories in line with a theory. In this study as well, with the investigations carried out on the relationship of the concepts with each other, it seems that the "family of causes and consequences" can best integrate the

categories around the central category, and finally the research model was drawn according to Figure 1. Therefore, the 27 identified concepts were categorized into 2 main categories and one central category and formed the final model of the upcoming research.

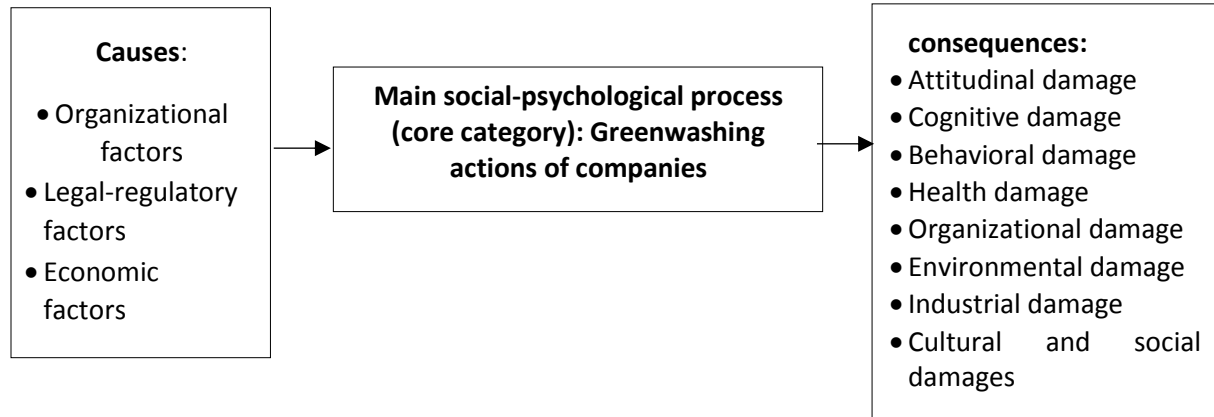


Figure 1. *The model resulting from the research*

Conclusion

The purpose of this research was to analyze the greenwashing measures in active companies in the dairy industry using the grounded theory based on the Glaserian approach. As it was said, the research conducted by the researcher indicated that there is no internal study in this field. On the other hand, foreign studies have also focused on one or two causes or consequences separately; while each individual action can have unique causes and consequences that are necessary to identify in order to control and predict that action. Therefore, it can be said that the present study has looked at greenwashing as a separate structure and explained its process as a component action, and it is innovative. As it was observed, the first category of the set of categories introduced in this study was the category of causes. The financial and non-financial concepts that constitute the class of organizational factors have appeared as one of the categories of causes. Since companies need a large budget to green their products and processes, and on the other hand, the final price for the consumer of green products increases drastically, one of the topics that has been raised that leads to the spread of greenwashing in the industry, there are financial issues and challenges. Non-financial issues such as maintaining market share and maintaining survival have also been of great interest.

Legal-regulatory factors include two major categories of legal-regulatory concepts in the industry and outside the industry. The absence of environmental standards, limited requirements for production process pollution and legal pressures of regulatory organizations are among the important factors in the industrial sector. Of course, legal-regulatory factors outside the industry should not be neglected, because in addition to the fact that there are no standards in this sector, there is no monitoring of the greenness of the products, which has led to the occurrence of greenwashing. The studies carried out in this field have emphasized the regulatory, normative and cognitive factors in the formation of companies' decisions to adopt specific organizational measures such as greenwashing (Delmas and Burbano, 2011). Despite the fact that the regulatory field is an important extra-organizational institutional stimulus for greenwashing, nevertheless, the aforementioned factors alone cannot explain the reasons for the use of different strategies by companies. As in previous researches, the important role of incentive structure and ethical climate, communication and effective reports within the company, and organizational deterrence and pressure have been emphasized (Delmas and Burbano, 2011), Lyon & Montgomery (2015) also have not overlooked the importance of

organizational or internal factors as drivers of greenwashing in their research and have considered the lack of environmental laws, the threat of regulations, the size of the organization and low transparency as factors of this factor. Economic factors that include national and international economic factors, in line with the derived codes, include the sharp decline in people's purchasing power, allocation of subsidies for green marketing to companies, existing domestic economic problems, and unhealthy economic conditions among the national economic factors in this study and on the other hand, the existence of sanctions and international pressures are considered as an important challenge for the occurrence of greenwashing by companies. The most widely used and dominant explanatory theory for social and environmental disclosure is the legitimacy theory. According to this theory, the company is influenced by the society and the environment in which it operates, and in this regard, it discloses information in response to various economic, social, political and environmental factors, which these disclosures affect the activity. gives legitimacy to the company (Kent & Ung, 2003). This theory states that a company will not survive unless its values are aligned with social and environmental factors at the macro level. Since the concept of sustainability and sustainable development is considered as a huge global trend in the direction of protecting society and nature (Hurth & Whittlesea, 2017) and also, organizations have great social, economic and environmental responsibilities in front of their employees, shareholders, customers, government, suppliers and all their stakeholders, so organizations must undergo cultural changes and transform effective mentality to be able to assume social, economic and environmental responsibility towards employees, shareholders and beneficiaries. On the other hand, providing nutritious dairy products to consumers from an

economic, social and environmental point of view improves the industry, society and the earth for the next generations (Von Keyserlingk & et al., 2013) therefore, green consumption in the long term can play an important role in the sustainable economic and social development of the society (Sun et al., 2019) and also a potential explanation for environmental and social disclosure in the term of the company's responsiveness to the demands of the stakeholders, the company's strategic orientation towards environmental and social responsibilities, and the exchange between social, environmental and economic goals. provides the company (Deegan et al., 2002) and the external environment of the organization includes economic, political and social consequences, so an organization must have enough knowledge and, in this case, receive support and legitimacy from the environment (Rahaman et al., 2004), An environment that can affect a variety of marketing norms is competitors, customers, distribution channels, suppliers, and stakeholders that determine how each component of the task environment will be affected (Noorshargh et al., 2019). According to what was said, unfavorable economic factors can play an important role in the formation of greenwashing measures. As Lyon & Montgomery (2015) have introduced the weak connection with the global economic system as one of the external factors for the occurrence of greenwashing, despite the unstable economic conditions, we can witness greenwashing in companies.

The second well-known category refers to the numerous consequences of companies' greenwashing actions, which include attitudinal, cognitive, behavioral, health, organizational, environmental, industrial and cultural and social damages. Based on the results of this research, it can be said that the most important damage caused by the greenwashing phenomenon is directed at the consumer. One of the consequences of going

greenwashing is the consumer's perception, attitude and behavior towards the company's product and other active partners in the dairy industry and other industries beyond that. As the findings of past research indicate the negative effects of greenwashing on consumer green purchasing behavior (Hameed et al., 2021), consumer behavioral tendencies (Mangini et al., 2020), consumer environmental perceptions (Szabo & Webster, 2020) and consumer green purchase intention (Nguyen & et al., 2019) and most importantly green product purchase decisions (Braga & et al., 2019) and also the intention to buy green products of other brands (Wang et al., 2019). In the meantime, the consumer's loyalty and trust towards the company and its brand are also seriously damaged (More, 2019) and in general, according to Yang et al (2020) consumers, companies, stakeholders and society are the main groups that are affected by the negative effects of greenwashing. Most of the consequences identified in this study were in line with the consequences that other researchers have identified in their studies for greenwashing measures. For example, as in this study, the change in purchase intention and the change in communication factors under the set of behavioral harms are considered as one of the consequences, and the extracted codes include confusion, negative impact on the consumer's green purchase intention, and interest in the brand has been the results of previous studies such as Avcilar & Demirgünes (2017), Wang et al (2019) and Zhang et al (2018) were also in line with confirming the mentioned factors. On the other hand, several studies have pointed to the perceptual consequences of greenwashing (for example, Szabo & Webster, 2020; Martínez & et. Al, 2020; Braga & et al., 2019) as well as the results of the present research. As the findings of several studies such as Braga and et al (2019), Chen et al (2020) and Chen et al (2019) indicate the negative impact of greenwashing on consumer's trust and loyalty,

paying attention to the topic of attitudinal damage in the present research is also very significant because it leads to a change in the consumer's attitude towards the product, company, industry and even other products and industries. However, one should not be unaware of the obvious and hidden environmental damage and the negative consequences of this phenomenon on the health of the soul and body.

It is suggested to the researchers that the study process carried out be used for other environmentally destructive actions in organizations. As it was said earlier, every activity and action in organizations has its own causes and consequences, if they are identified, it will be possible to predict and control this category of negative actions in polluting industries. Considering that the present study was conducted in the geographical territory of the companies and producers of the dairy industry in Razavi Khorasan and one of the limitations is the dependence of the model on the context under study, it is suggested that this research on the other industries should also be done. This can provide more and wider understanding of these activities and enable a comparative comparison between this study and the conducted studies. Also, since this research was done with a qualitative approach, it is suggested to other researchers to test the model presented in this research in polluting industries by designing the relevant quantitative tool and the validity of the existing relationships and examine between different categories.

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