


Chapter 13

When Sustainability Goes Wrong: A Critical Perspective About Consumer Behaviour, Greenwashing, and its Impact on Sustainability

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ABSTRACT

Based on a conceptual discussion, this chapter focused on current consumer behavior, with a special emphasis on its relationship with sustainability, and on the recent sustainable practices of companies. Through the analysis of these two pillars, this narrative review aimed to frame sustainability and emphasize the greenwashing processes that take place in this context. To this end, some reasons why sustainability has been a major subject of debate in recent decades and also evidence on consumer behavior about this discussion were pointed out. The role of companies was also outlined – through corporate social responsibility practices – bridging the issue of greenwashing. As a negative aspect associated with sustainability, greenwashing was observed in depth, with a special focus on the digital environment, and in the context of marketing and influence.

1. INTRODUCTION

The global society has faced several challenges in the last decades, and forecasts point out critical damages related to social, economic, and environmental issues – such as civil conflicts, global warming,

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and poverty, for example, just to name a few. As a natural consequence, consumer behavior has been changing drastically, and sustainability has been elevated as an important drive to lead change (Boechat et al., 2022).

This urge to provide a more sustainable context for current and future generations is applying pressure among organizations to enhance their sustainable behavior to fulfill stakeholders' expectations (Li et al., 2023), creating a better environmental reputation (Mazur-wierzbicka, 2022). Consequently, there has been an explosion of green initiatives (Shanor & Light, 2022) usually represented by "eco-friendly", "sustainable" or "organic" labels (Schmuck et al., 2018).

Greenwashing emerges when an organization has limited transparency (Dong et al., 2023) i.e., when it discloses positive environmental actions but "hides" those negative ones, giving an overall positive positioning regarding this matter (Arouri et al., 2021). This attempt to spend money promoting green actions instead of actually implementing them (Anand, 2022) creates a divergency between communication and practice (Li et al., 2023).

Based on these assumptions, this chapter develops a critical perspective on consumer behavior, greenwashing, and its impact on sustainability, considering that greenwashing is a practice that denotes the dark side of sustainable practices.

To fundament this point of view, the chapter starts explaining why sustainability is a global and common speech nowadays, highlighting the debate regarding a sustainable crisis. In sequence, it highlights the current consumerism process and the reasons why sustainability is a challenge to regular global consumption habits. In other words, this chapter presents the misalignment of consumers' sustainability intentions and actual behavior.

Following this rationale, Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR) is discussed as an important asset to any organization, due to its positive impact on several aspects of the brand and the organization itself. A current state of art of this concept is provided to enhance its importance and, also, greenwashing's emergence. Thus, greenwashing is the topic that follows this discussion, being deeply analyzed through literature, current examples, its performance in the digital fields, and the close relationship established between greenwashing and marketing techniques.

2. SUSTAINABILITY AS GLOBAL SPEECH: WHY SOCIETY CAN'T STOP TALKING ABOUT IT

Technology has benefited everyday life in many ways, but it has also brought disadvantages and serious problems. At the beginning of the 20th century, humanity became aware that in the moral domain there was a dark side in scientific and technological advances (Coutinho, 2009). The evolution of technology brought advantages but has encouraged the unrestrained exploitation of the planet's natural resources and caused high levels of pollution (Coutinho, 2009). As society and economy developed, the environment began to suffer from certain actions by human beings (ElHaffara et al., 2020).

According to Brahami et al. (2022), industrialization, urbanization, population explosion, wild capitalism programmed to obtain ever-increasing levels of productivity, consumption and profits are depleting the planet's resources, sending excessive amounts of carbon monoxide into the atmosphere, which is responsible for the destruction of the ozone layer and the consequent greenhouse effect. Moreover, these factors are depleting the oceans, annihilating the equatorial forests, as well as inflating non-biodegradable waste on land and in the seas: cement, polystyrene, plastics, tires, glass.

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