The practice of greenwashing in the context of sustainable development and corporate social responsibility

A prática do greenwashing no contexto do desenvolvimento sustentável e da responsabilidade social corporativa

La práctica del greenwashing en el contexto del desarrollo sostenible y la responsabilidad social corporativa

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Abstract
In the knowledge society, practically all organizational activities are carried out with the massive use of the internet. In this sense, information is shared at an ever-increasing speed. Depending on what is shared, the reputation of people and companies can be defamed, especially when what is shared is false. The study's general objective is to elucidate the practice of greenwashing in the context of sustainable development and corporate social responsibility. The term greenwashing refers to those companies that make a point of propagating to society that they value the preservation of the environment but whose practices demonstrate the opposite of this context. Thus, the risk of having the image of a socially and environmentally responsible organization can be undone at any time. The method used was the conceptual bibliography, a set of research techniques formed by four phases: a) definition of research questions, b) data collection, c) organization and analysis of data, and d) generation of responses. This method made it possible to verify that greenwashing is a risky strategy, to say the least, and not recommended for any company, as the price to pay when discovering the false identity of an environmentally friendly organization is greater than the effort made to maintain appearances, before society and other interested parties. The conclusion asserts that the most recommended thing is that companies seek to be sustainable in their daily lives, but in a planned way, incorporating this into their values, practices, and organizational culture.


Resumo
Na sociedade do conhecimento, praticamente todas as atividades organizacionais são realizadas com o uso massivo da internet. Nesse sentido, a informação é compartilhada a uma velocidade cada vez maior. Dependendo do que é compartilhado, a reputação de pessoas e empresas pode ser difamada, principalmente quando o que se compartilha é falso. O objetivo geral do estudo é elucidar a prática do greenwashing no contexto do desenvolvimento sustentável e da responsabilidade social corporativa. O termo greenwashing diz respeito àquelas empresas que fazem questão de propagar para a sociedade que valorizam a preservação do meio ambiente, mas cujas práticas demonstram o contrário deste contexto. Assim, o risco de ter a imagem de uma organização social e ambientalmente responsável pode ser desfeito a qualquer momento. O método utilizado foi a bibliográfico conceitual, que é um conjunto de técnicas de pesquisa formado por quatro fases: a) definição das questões de
Pesquisa, b) coleta de dados, c) organização e análise dos dados e d) geração de respostas. Esse método permitiu verificar que el greenwashing es una estrategia arriesgada, para decir el mínimo, e no recomendada para ninguna empresa, pois el precio a pagar diante el descubrimiento de la falsa identidad de una organización ambientalmente correcta es mayor que el esfuerzo emprendido para mantener las apariencias ante el sociedad y otras partes interesadas. A conclusión asimilada que lo más recomendado es que las empresas busquen ser sustentables en su día a día, mas de forma planejada, incorporando esto a sus valores, prácticas y cultura organizacional.

Palavras-chave: Noticias Falsas. Reputação Organizacional. Sociedade del Conocimiento

Greenwashing. Sustentabilidad.

Resumen
En la sociedad del conocimiento prácticamente todas las actividades organizativas se realizan con el uso masivo de internet. En este sentido, la información se comparte a una velocidad cada vez mayor. Dependiendo de lo que se comparte, se puede difamar la reputación de las personas y empresas, especialmente cuando lo que se comparte es falso. El objetivo general del estudio es dilucidar la práctica del greenwashing en el contexto del desarrollo sostenible y la responsabilidad social corporativa. El término greenwashing se refiere a aquellas empresas que se esfuerzan por propagar a la sociedad que valoran la preservación del medio ambiente, pero cuyas prácticas demuestran lo contrario de este contexto. Así, el riesgo de tener la imagen de una organización social y ambientalmente responsable puede deshacerse en cualquier momento. El método utilizado fue la bibliografía conceptual, un conjunto de técnicas de investigación formado por cuatro fases: a) definición de preguntas de investigación, b) recolección de datos, c) organización y análisis de datos y d) generación de respuestas. Este método permitió comprobar que el greenwashing es una estrategia cuanto menos arriesgada y no recomendable para ninguna empresa, ya que el precio a pagar al descubrir la identidad falsa de una organización respetuosa con el medio ambiente es mayor que el esfuerzo realizado por mantener las apariencias ante la sociedad y demás partes interesadas. La conclusión asimilada que lo más recomendable es que las empresas busquen ser sustentables en su vida diaria, pero de manera planificada, incorporando esto a sus valores, prácticas y cultura organizacional.

Palabras clave: Noticias Falsas. Reputación Organizacional. Sociedad del Conocimiento

Greenwashing. Sostenibilidad.
Introduction

Today, one of the most debated topics, both in the academic and organizational contexts, concerns sustainability (Balanay & Halog, 2016; Elkington, 2001; Ertz, 2020; Feil & Schreiber, 2017; Lima, 2020; Sariatli, 2017). As a result, in addition to recurring concerns about issues such as, for example, product quality or the best sales strategy, companies also need to add consistent actions to their strategies aimed at addressing issues related to the sustainable context (Dempsey et al., 2011; Feil & Schreiber, 2017). This encompasses not only the planning and carrying out of ecologically correct practices but also how to make potential customers and other interested parties aware that a particular company is adept at preserving the environment and other related causes.

However, not all companies have a robust marketing and social communication team to operationalize this type of media disclosure. Another possible obstacle, which is more focused on the financial side, concerns the lack of resources to invest in an action plan focused on these issues linked to sustainability. Whether out of ignorance or bad faith, some companies adopt a practice known in the organizational environment as greenwashing (Barros, 2020). Roughly translated, this term means something like “green brushstroke.” In an analogous view, it is as if the company applied a “makeup” to its actions to show society that it is sustainable. In other words, greenwashing is a practice in which companies that do not have a sustainable performance proven in an uncontested way as a healthy and successful start to propagate to their stakeholders that their actions and processes are congruent with what is expected of a sustainable organization (Barros, 2020; Brito et al., 2010).

It is so happening that humanity currently lives in a technological society (Nascimento-e-Silva, 2020). This means that most people are connected to some internet network to a greater or lesser extent. The undoubted influence of technologies in the current scenario made Kriezyu (2019) call the society of today the information society. By using the “greenwash” or “green brush,” companies put themselves at high risk of being unmasked, which can result in the bankrupt state of the brand and the company itself. In today's world, information is disseminated with astonishing speed; it is necessary to debate what leads some organizations to create a spectacle of their environmental initiatives to gain consumer respect and empathy (Ornelas, 2016).

This study aims to elucidate greenwashing practices in the context of sustainable development and corporate social responsibility. This study aims to invite organizational
companies, in general, to reflect on the risks involved in adopting greenwashing practices. In the scientific literature, this problem can be seen as misleading advertising, which not only gives a false impression about a company's practices and processes but also leads to disseminating unsuitable information to the consumer (Mauro, 2014; Varela, 2014). Sustainable issues are immensely worrying since they cause the planet to culminate in a significant environmental crisis (Lima, 2020).

The study is justified for two reasons. The first is theoretical and aims to collaborate with the state of the art regarding the state of the art on greenwashing in Brazil. It can be said that this is a relatively recent theme in the organizational scenario, but it deals not only with environmental aspects but also ethical ones (Pagotto, 2013). This problem can be addressed in the light of sustainability, marketing, and law, as shown in the study by Méo (2017). The second reason that encouraged the research is practical and aims to learn more about why greenwashing exists, which is equivalent to a lying image of the organization on a very relevant topic to humanity. In addition to administration, economics, marketing, social communication, law, and the environment are exciting parties in the debate on this theme. With this, we seek to find research trends on greenwashing in the present and gaps that can be filled in future research.

**Theoretical Foundation**

For many decades, the issue of sustainable development was relegated to the background. This is because, in past decades, what mattered to organizations was achieving profit. Thus, care for employees and nature was unimportant (Tachizawa, 2008). This predatory practice of wealth generation has led many countries to conduct under the aegis that natural resources are supposedly infinite (Oliveira et al., 2021). It is known that this does not proceed and that organizations constantly face the challenge of correctly managing their resources (Oliveira; Nascimento-e-Silva, 2020; Silva, 2019).

Faced with the unbridled and unwise consumption of resources, humanity realized something was wrong. This signaling became more evident from events such as World War II, the regrettable episode involving the cities of Hiroshima and Nagasaki, and, more recently, the nuclear accident in Chornobyl (Pochmann, 2010). Faced with these catastrophes, humanity realized it was on the wrong path and that preserving the planet and its resources would be the most viable solution. From there, the purely economic vision of development gives way to a
more holistic vision, which is also concerned with the social and environmental aspects related to this issue of development, growth, and progress (Elkington, 2001). Added to this are world-class events, such as the World Conference on the Environment held by the United Nations in 1972, which found the obvious: natural resources were not as infinite as imagined (Pes & Brum, 2015).

In short, what the literature calls the Triple Bottom Line (Dempsey et al., 2011) represents a new look at how wealth is generated. The approach to sustainability and related issues involves one of the maxims most propagated in the literature: preserving resources in the present to avoid problems for future generations (Doliveira et al., 2020;). Balancing the dimensions that make up this Sustainability Tripod is not the most straightforward task, which demands a high degree of governance from managers, especially those who deal with public resources (Dixit, 2009). This is necessary so that the principles of this theory can be fulfilled in practice, generating well-being, quality of life, and dignity for all.

In the corporate environment, organizations are challenged to, in addition to observing issues such as quality, price, and competitiveness, attend to environmental causes (Silva et al., 2011). However, just as there is a need to generate reliable products and services, as well as to have quality and customer service at a level of excellence, attending to environmental causes ended up becoming a sine qua non condition for the perpetuity of organizational activities (Jackson et al., 2011). Thus, sustainability ended up becoming one of the differentiating factors, just like quality, price, and customer service, to name a few.

Thus, there is a worldwide consensus that wealth generation is more assertive when strategies are adopted that not only favor an economic vision that values profits but also consider the social and environmental aspects related to a company's operations (Bryant & Stowe, 2020). This parameter is widely accepted in the corporate environment, and it has proven to be a fruitful field of study through which it can be seen how organizations behave in the face of socio-environmental demands connected to their operating environment.

2.1 Corporate Social Responsibility

In addition to the issue of sustainability, there is also another theme that is equally relevant to the debate on greenwashing: corporate social responsibility. This facet of the organizational field represents an opportunity for companies to stand out in their competitive environment (Premlata & Agrawal, 2013). This can be done by carrying out actions that can
improve the quality of life of the organization's community. In addition, organizations must seek ways to make their employees work satisfied, motivated, and engaged. This intention can be achieved by providing a safe work environment, corporate governance, and respect for labor laws.

Organizations should remember that corporate social responsibility should generate benefits for all interested parties, here called stakeholders (Parubchak & Raduck, 2019). This is necessary for two reasons. The first is constructing and strengthening strategic alliances (Mtonga & Banja, 2020). These alliances are essential so that each organization that is part of the organization's relationship network can feel duly respected and included in a network where everyone participates and benefits. The second point to be observed concerns trust (D'ávila, 2016). Strengthening the relationship between companies and their stakeholders strengthens the organization's image, thus generating credibility with partner institutions. It is necessary to recognize the benefits that can be achieved through the correct adoption of corporate social responsibility. The following can be listed for illustrative purposes: a) positive impact on the organization's finances; b) increased productivity due to the respect and safety afforded to employees; c) cost reduction; d) better use of available resources, and e) reduction of possible conflicts in the foreign market with customers (Anastassova, 2015). It is appropriate to say that corporate social responsibility cannot be confused with welfare (SILVA et al., 2011).

In addition, organizations that choose to add corporate social responsibility to their management strategies must remember that this represents the possibility of achieving good results in the face of government, nature, and society (Navickas & Kountautiené, 2014). Nature starts to benefit from the moment less aggressive ways to the environment of wealth production are adopted. The government benefits from companies based on uprightness in their attitudes since these organizations operate in their competitive field based on ethical and moral principles. Society also benefits from seeing that business companies seek not only to generate profits but also to respect nature, employees, suppliers, and other interested parties. It is necessary to clarify that at the organizational level, corporate social responsibility cannot be confused with sporadic practices (Silva et al., 2011). Managers should remember that corporate social responsibility has become a competitive differentiator, like innovation and quality (Carlos, 2020; Kim & Choi, 2020; Slack et al., 2009). So, instead of being seen as a practice to be carried out only at specific times, corporate social responsibility must be part of the organization's strategies. Studies by Silva (2019) and Silva et al. (2019) clarify that
strategies are necessary for successfully implementing management plans. In this vein, by having its strategic relevance recognized, corporate social responsibility can make it possible to obtain profits without harming the principles that support sustainability's theoretical and practical aspects (Ertz, 2020; Feil & Schreiber, 2017; Lui et al., 2020).

Methodology

The present study was based on the bibliographic-conceptual method developed by Nascimento-e-Silva (2012; 2020; 2021a). This method is characterized by gathering procedural writing techniques: the correct execution of each step will undoubtedly generate a result (Silva, 2019). In summary, the method consists of four phases arranged in sequence and interconnected: a) definition of research questions, b) data collection, c) data organization and analysis, and d) generation of answers (Silva; Nascimento-e-Silva, 2020).

The process begins with defining the research question (Nascimento-e-Silva, 2021b). In the specific case of the study, the guiding questions were: “What is greenwashing?”; “What is sustainable development?”; and “What is corporate social responsibility?” The scientific literature shows that this question is a guiding question and a research problem (Brei et al., 2014; Lukosevicius, 2018). Nascimento-e-Silva (2012) reports that, in a mandatory way, scientific research can only be considered as such if it has a research question as its guide. This corroborates the study by Nouri and McComas (2019), who point out that science is the art of knowing how to ask the right research questions. In turn, Lukosevicius (2018) and Zanella (2013) say that the question that conducts research should be called a problem, which presupposes the researcher's position as a solver of the situation that surrounds his scientific investigation.

The second step of the method is data collection Nascimento-e-Silva (2023. For this, the databases were consulted, which are the places recommended by science to obtain answers that can supply the previously defined research questions (Nascimento-e-Silva, 2012; 2020; 2021b; Silva & Nascimento-e-Silva, 2020). For this study, the conceptual part included searches in the Google Scholar and Science Direct databases. It should be clarified that this selection of contents did not consider course completion papers or works resulting from lato sensu research.

The third moment of the method is the organization and analysis of the data. Here, the following procedures are adopted: The first is the arrangement of responses in a reference
The practice of greenwashing in the context of sustainable development and corporate social responsibility frame called data mass (Nascimento-e-Silva, 2012; 2020). This resource can be done on a blank page in Microsoft Word or an electronic spreadsheet. The frame is formed with two columns. The first must contain the references of the answers previously collected in the databases according to the Associação Brasileira de Normas Técnicas – ABNT regulations. The answers are transcribed literally in the second column, between quotation marks and with their respective page numbers. Answers should start with phrases like “Greenwashing consists of...”; “Greenwashing represents...”; ”Greenwashing can be conceptualized as...” and other affirmative phrases.

After this procedure, the work is to detect the equivalence terms in each of the selected answers (Nascimento-e-Silva, 2012; 2020). This consists of analyzing the terms and meanings that are most apparent in each sentence. By way of example, if the research question chosen were “What is management?”, the most common term present in the answers available in the databases would be “process” since most answers begin with the phrase “Management.” It is the process..." In possession of the equivalence terms, the method ends with writing the answer, which was elaborated based on what the scientific literature brought about the researched topic (Nascimento-e-Silva, 2012; 2020). This response is usually formed by a period consisting of three sentences. The first seeks to explain the phenomenon, while the other phrases complement the explanation of the phenomenon.

Results and Discussions

The term greenwashing can be seen as an action or a set of marketing actions that are promoted to highlight positive ecological impressions about the processes and practices of a given organization (Marciniak, 2010). The fact that it is a marketing initiative suggests giving greater visibility to an aspect of the organization that is not well-known to the public. The term “ecological impressions” may refer to the objective of making potential consumers and society associate the company's brand with an ethical, diligent, and responsible attitude about environmental causes.

The reason for this need for organizations to explore so-called green marketing with greater emphasis lies in the public's conscious attitude. Some are sympathetic to preserving the environment and are willing to purchase ecologically correct and sustainable products (Méo, 2017). Thus, either through cleaner processes or by reducing environmental impacts, companies seek to gain the trust of consumers and other stakeholders by propagating
environmentally responsible practices. There is nothing wrong with that: the problem is when this information is false, which in modern society is conventionally called fake news (Figueira & Santos, 2019).

Adopting such a practice by some organizations is problematic since making a lie the mainstay of an organization’s image is inconsistent with the ethical principles with which a company should be managed. In Brazil, in the light of the law, the Consumer Defense Code (Brasil, 1990) is the legal instrument that protects good faith. Thus, any purchase and sale relationship must be based on transparency. In this perspective, using greenwashing to disseminate sustainable postures that are not confirmed in practice is a marketing action that is not recommended. This is because the first contact line is information for users or consumers who still do not know a product or service (Gregorio, 2018). If, right at the beginning of the relationship with the public, the company already demonstrates to be disreputable, automatically, what it produces and sells is unreliable, which leads to the loss of its credibility.

Among the risks involved in greenwashing, the legal aspect related to this practice must be considered. This is seen in Table 1, which lists the legislation that seeks to protect consumers from misleading advertisements (Kamlot, 2013). From the number of rules expressed in this table, it is clear how serious and dangerous it is for organizations to see greenwashing as a solution to be seen as sustainable companies.

Table 1

*Brazilian legislation related to the fight against greenwashing.*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Legislation</th>
<th>Points related to greenwashing</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Law No. 8,078 of 1990: Consumer Protection Code</td>
<td>Good faith</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Law No. 12,305 of 2010: National Solid Waste Policy</td>
<td>Shared responsibility between the public sector, companies, and consumers</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>ABNT ISO 14.021: Standard of 2017</td>
<td>The author of the statement is responsible for what he informs.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Brazilian Advertising Self-Regulation Code of the National Advertising Self-Regulation Council (CONAR) - Annex U: Declarations on Sustainability (2021/2022)</td>
<td>General principles:</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Accuracy and Clarity</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Relevance</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Source: Adapted by the authors based on IDEC (2019, p. 7).
As can be seen, one of the main failures related to the practice of greenwashing is the lack of congruence between discourse and practice. While the company makes efforts to keep up appearances with its stakeholders, its practice in its daily life demonstrates precisely the opposite of the commitment propagated to society, which can, at any time, put its reputation in check (Jorge, 2010; Pagotto, 2013.). This situation directly violates what is proclaimed in the laws and regulations set out in Table 1. It is understood that greenwashing is a practice linked to companies' marketing, which can, depending on how it is done, influence the purchase decisions of its potential customers (Silva, 2022). However, if, on the one hand, there is the possibility of increasing sales and, therefore, profitability, on the other hand, there is always the risk that the truth will come out. In the words of IDEC (2019), maintaining this practice means that a green lie has very high risks. By choosing to follow this path, the organization is constantly threatened to lose one of the most precious things supporting the continuity of its operations: consumer trust (D'ávila, 2016).

In times gone by, when information was concentrated in a few communication vehicles, a strategy of this nature could even be sustained for a longer time. However, even so, an eventual discovery of the truth would bring Homeric damage to those who use greenwashing. Today, practically all human activities depend on Internet use to a greater or lesser extent (Krikey, 2019). With that, the information became much more accessible compared to past decades when technology was not so evolved. This is one more reason for companies to avoid going down the false path of greenwashing. The lie can become known to society anytime, severely tarnishing the brand and everything related to the company practicing greenwashing (Correa et al., 2018).

It is correct to say that in today's context, organizations are challenged to stay alive in an uncertain and very complex competitive environment (Mengistie, 2019). This requires not only constant surveillance of what happens outside the company but also efficient and effective management to maintain the financial and market sustainability of the business (Oliveira; Nascimento-e-Silva, 2020; Silva, 2019; Silva et al., 2021; Yordanova-Dinova, 2019). Figure 1 shows some items that justify the non-use of greenwashing at the corporate level.
As greenwashing is not a sustainable strategy in the long term, there is always the risk of having the lies told to the public discovered and, with that, a loss of trust in the brand and, consequently, in the things that the company does (Correa & Machado; Braga Junior, 2018; Idec, 2019). With this, there is the loss of one of the primary structuring axes in the relationship between customer and supplier: credibility (Ferreira, 2022). The risk of companies embarking on greenwashing is high. This is because there are consumer protection bodies, the scientific community, regulatory bodies, and movements engaged in environmental causes that can, at any time, undo the farce of the discourse committed to sustainability (Ottman, 2012). It is paradoxical for a company to want to link its image to sustainable causes through successive lies told to consumers since this is not a practice that will lead the company to long-term success.

The legal losses arising from greenwashing result from disrespect for consumers since, by acting in bad faith, companies are deceiving their customers in favor of maintaining a green lie (Idec, 2019). Financial losses culminate in consumers' lack of confidence in everything it does from the moment the hoax is discovered (Correa et al., 2018). As a result of this scenario, there are market losses, which can be exemplified in the form of breaches of contract and loss of relevant strategic alliances (Mtonga & Banja, 2020). Market losses summarize the other setbacks mentioned above and make the survival of the company practicing greenwashing in its competitive context much more complicated. It can be said that greenwashing represents a
shortcut to achieving illusory fame. This will result in none other than organizational failure (Nascimento-e-Silva, 2017).

**Conclusion**

This study sought to elucidate the theme of greenwashing in the context of sustainable development and corporate social responsibility. It is emphasized that greenwashing is not recommended since the company always risks being unmasked and seeing its reputation as an ecologically correct organization being destroyed. This brings Homeric losses, from the loss of customer confidence, the breach of contracts with suppliers, the payment of fines for disrespecting environmental laws, and other adverse effects. The most recommended thing is that companies seek to be sustainable in their daily lives, but in a planned way, incorporating this into their values, practices, and organizational culture. It is no use just saying you do: the speech needs to be accompanied by attitudes and results. Similarly, it can be inferred that organizations that practice greenwashing in 2021 are adopting a suicidal tactic, which a planned, long-term, sustainable, but effective strategy could perfectly replace. Practicing this organizational strategy in the knowledge society demonstrates irrationality, a crass mistake no company can commit. For future studies, further research on corporate social responsibility is suggested, more precisely in the context of Brazilian universities on the bluewashing phenomenon.

**References**


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