Consumers' Greenwashing Perceptions: The Role of Negative Sustainability Information and The Buffering Effect of Prior Reputation

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Abstract

Consumers' environmental awareness increased, leading to a more extensive understanding of the ecological impact of their purchases. Therefore, companies started to engage in Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR) practices to meet consumers' demands for environmentally responsible actions. However, due to stakeholders' pressure on this matter, some firms have started to engage in misleading activities that exaggerate their sustainability efforts. Consumers perceive this as greenwashing, and it causes skepticism. Since more research is needed to assess the role of negative information in forming greenwashing perceptions towards well-established brands and regarding consumers' greenwashing perspective, this study aims to fill this knowledge gap. In the present study, 140 participants were presented with sustainability information about Coca-Cola Co. in an online experiment. Initially, their prior reputation and prior sustainability reputation were assessed, and then participants were randomly assigned to positive or negative sustainability information. Finally, their greenwashing perception was analyzed. This study aimed to investigate whether positive prior reputation and positive prior sustainability reputation buffer the impact of negative information on greenwashing perceptions. This hypothesis was not supported. However, habitual consumption strengthened the effect of negative information. For habitual Coca-Cola drinkers, arguably because they are more emotionally involved with the brand, negative sustainability information leads to more greenwashing perceptions than for light Coca-Cola drinkers. Therefore, sustainability literature might also take habitual use into consideration.

Keywords: Greenwashing, Greenwashing Perception, Sustainability Information, Prior Reputation, Prior Sustainability Reputation, Buffering Effect, Coca-Cola Co.

Consumers' Greenwashing Perceptions: The Role of Negative Sustainability Information and The Buffering Effect of Prior Reputation

People's environmental concern has increased significantly through the years (Verheggen, 2019). Nowadays, consumers have a better understanding of their purchases' impact on the environment (Skeldon, 2020). Therefore, some of them engage in more environmentally friendly behaviors (Business Wire, 2021) and demand firms to act accordingly (Wolniak, 2016). For these reasons, companies started to take some measures (Detomasi, 2008). For example, more and more organizations engage in Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR) practices (Heyward, 2020).

Today CSR has become vital for companies (Durand et al., 2019). Stakeholders now pay more attention to the firm's behavior toward the environment (Peasley et al., 2021). Therefore, organizations are asked to engage in sustainable business practices and to announce them (Stanaland et al., 2011). For example, one way to announce their practices is through reports (Wolniak, 2016), which should notify the public about the firm's actions toward environmental welfare (Hys & Hawrysz, 2012).

However, due to this stakeholders' pressure towards firms' environmental action (Torelli et al., 2020), organizations sometimes over-claim their green activities (Brouwer, 2016), to gain profit (Ioannou et al., 2022) or enhance their reputation (Siltaoja, 2006). This practice can damage companies' image and reputation (Ioannou et al., 2022), as consumers become more dubious toward the organization and their CSR practices (Aji & Sutikno, 2015). As a result, consumers become more hesitant when buying green products (Aji & Sutikno, 2015), considering this as greenwashing.

Since sustainability is often a complicated technical matter (Maphosa, 2021), it is argued that sustainability literacy should be enhanced in consumers as it might prevent consumers from buying products by a company that is doing greenwashing (Schafeld, 2019)

or perceiving greenwashing even when companies are engaging in honest sustainability practices (Braga et al., 2019). Sustainability literacy is "*the knowledge, skills and mindsets that allow individuals to become deeply committed to building a sustainable future and assisting in making informed and effective decisions to this end*" (United Nations, n.d., para. 1). Furthermore, research suggests that people could learn from green marketing, improving their sustainability literacy (Tan, 2011). Green marketing "*describes a company's efforts to advertise the environmental sustainability of its business practices*" (Fernando, 2023, para. 3).

However, green marketing practices can be deceitful. For example, Coca-Cola Co. publishes numerous sustainability campaigns, although known as *the world's biggest plastic polluter* (Laville, 2022). This suggests that Coca-Cola Co. is engaging in greenwashing practices by claiming more green action than it is actually doing (Wolniak, 2016).

Nevertheless, people perceive greenwashing practices differently (Torelli et al., 2020). For example, it might depend on the prior reputation consumers have of a brand. A positive prior reputation might act as a buffer mitigating the negative consequences of a company's wrongdoing (Jonkman et al., 2020). Reputation works as a buffer when businesses that develop a good reputation may experience reduced reputational harm during a crisis (Koch & Vieterbl, 2022). Particularly, sustainability reputation has become essential for companies as it helps them engage and keep consumers and enhance their overall reputation (Northern Power System, 2023). Together with sustainability reputation, according to Martínez and Rodríguez del Bosque (2014), sustainability information can help the company to publicize the brand positively, in order to not make consumers perceive greenwashing.

Therefore, the present study aims to explore consumers' greenwashing perceptions when confronted with sustainability information. Greenwashing has been studied sporadically (Aji & Sutikno, 2015), and little research has addressed deceitful CSR communication

(Peasley et al., 2021). Hence, further research is needed to explore the field of sustainability (Jonkman et al., 2020). Since research found that positive prior reputation might minimize the effects of negative information (Zavyalova et al., 2012), the current study aims to explore whether prior reputation effectively shields also from negative information. Furthermore, it can also bring new insights into the buffering effect by assessing the extent to which this effect ranges. For example, according to Jonkman et al. (2020), consumers with positive prior reputations were less likely to be influenced by negative information. This suggests that, contrarily, consumers with a negative prior reputation will confirm their negative thoughts about the brand after the negative information. However, people might also suspect that organizations publish deceitful information on purpose as a greenwashing practice (Siltaoja, 2006). This would result in greenwashing perceptions, presenting another view on the buffering effect.

Hence, this study contributes to consumer behavior research, green marketing, and reputation management by offering explanations for when and why negative information about a brand might lead to greenwashing perceptions. As such, it contributes to understanding cognitive processes underlying consumer skepticism and loyalty (Quicanga, 2023), explaining how consumers understand green advertising and revealing situational factors that influence consumers or make them skeptical.

Moreover, this study also holds societal relevance. For example, on the companies' side, organizations might apply strategies to enhance their reputation (e.g., transparent green communication, stakeholder engagement, or promising doable objectives) or understand how to prevent greenwashing judgments. On the consumer's side, sustainability literacy could be enhanced, leading them to make more informed choices and increase greenwashing concern and awareness.

The purpose of the current study is, namely, to investigate whether there is a difference between consumers' greenwashing perceptions when presented with sustainability information about Coca-Cola Co. and whether positive prior reputation and prior sustainability reputation about the brand would moderate this relationship. This was investigated in a 2x1 experiment using a Coca-Cola Co. sustainability campaign and a negative and a positive website article. Although Coca-Cola Co.'s sustainability campaigns always depict their environmental objectives and the positive impact of the brand, countless website articles write about Coca-Cola Co.'s negative environmental impact, showing consumers how the brands' objectives and actions are not entirely truthful and accomplished. Therefore, the research question would ask whether the negative sustainability information about Coca-Cola Co. impacts consumers' greenwashing perception and whether positive prior reputation and prior sustainability reputation might protect against negative sustainability information.

Theoretical Framework

In the theoretical framework, first, some context will be given by the concepts of green marketing, corporate social responsibility, greenwashing, and sustainability literacy. Then, the current research's variables will be defined. The independent variable, sustainability information, presents two levels: negative information and positive information. Consumers' greenwashing perception is the dependent variable, and prior reputation and prior sustainability reputation will act as moderators. Prior reputation will also present two levels: positive prior reputation and negative prior reputation. Lastly, the case study (i.e., Coca-Cola Co.) will be analyzed and proposed as material for the experiment.

Corporate Social Responsibility

According to Stobierski (2021), corporate social responsibility implies that an organization partakes in environmental and social welfare, and he distinguishes between four

categories of corporate social responsibility: environmental, ethical, philanthropic, and economic. In the current research, the environmental one was considered. Declaring to care about the environment implies that you should fully engage in eco-friendly practices (Stobierski, 2021). This would enhance a firm's reputation, demonstrating that it has accomplished its environmental objectives and satisfied its public (Siltaoja, 2006).

Further, according to Peasley et al. (2021), CSR could be intended as a commitment of the firm toward and a deal with the society. If goals are accomplished, this could lead to a beneficial bond between the organization and the stakeholders (Lee et al., 2019). When undertaking CSR practices, companies want to comply with legislation, but they also want to be perceived by the public as sensible and engaged in environmental and social matters (Wolniak, 2016), which benefits the firm's image and reputation. Furthermore, having a strong CSR may weaken the effect that negative information can have (Bhattacharya et al., 2021). In fact, when trying to strengthen their reputation, sometimes firms may declare more green actions than they actually perform (Wolniak, 2016). Thus, companies engage in what consumers identify as *hypocrisy* (Wagner et al., 2020), which is "pretending to be what you are not" (Cambridge Dictionary, 2024), and it is perceived by consumers as greenwashing.

Green Marketing

On the one hand, marketing leads to unsustainable purchase behavior (Peattie & Charter, 2012) by stimulating consumption (Heath & Chatzidakis, 2011). On the other hand, it can motivate people to buy green products, to replace wasteful products (Peattie & Charter, 2012). Indeed, marketing becomes green marketing when it is used to sell eco-friendly products (Hintermeister, 2022). Studies on this field began in the 1970s (Vilkaitė-Vaitonė & Skačkauskienė, 2019), and according to Aji and Sutikno (2015, p. 436), green marketing is "*a concept and strategy adopted by a company to advertise its green practices as an expression of its concern for environmental issues.*" Nowadays, green marketing is seen as problematic

(Peattie & Charter, 2012) because deceitful sustainability campaigns are increasing (Bey et al., 2023) where, according to Cohen (1974, in Newell et al., 1998, p. 49), green advertising is defined as "*factually incorrect, subjective to multiple interpretations, guilty of omitting relevant information*."

According to a study conducted by Verleye et al. (2023), only 9.7% of the green advertising presented were trustworthy. Furthermore, according to another study by Ioannou et al. (2022), 42% of green advertising and campaigns were not truthful. This implies that organizations engage in a considerable amount of misleading communication. This practice is referred to as greenwashing (Aji & Sutikno, 2015), and worry about it is increasing (Carlson et al., 1993). Engaging in greenwashing practices has negative implications. For example, it could damage firms' reputation and image (Ioannou et al., 2022) by harming how consumers perceive the companies, as due to greenwashing, people have become increasingly cynical towards CSR practices (Aji & Sutikno, 2015). This brings consumers to be doubtful also about green advertising (Peattie & Charter, 2012), as these deceitful green claims make them think that the product is eco-friendly when it is not (Aji & Sutikno, 2015). According to Aji and Sutikno (2015), this would make consumers hesitant to buy it as they would not understand anymore if their purchase is actually eco-friendly or not (Aji & Sutikno, 2015), and they would develop negative attitudes towards the product and the company (Aji & Sutikno, 2015).

Perceived Greenwashing

Greenwashing owes its origin to Jay Westerveld (1986) (Becker-Olsen & Potucek, 2013). It is defined by the Cambridge Dictionary (2023) as an action "*to make people believe that your company is doing more to protect the environment than it really is*." The main reason for doing so is that organizations aim to profit from it (Ioannou et al., 2022). This happens because companies nowadays try more and more to be perceived as eco-friendly by

consumers in order to satisfy stakeholders' expectations (Torelli et al., 2020), as their requests for environmentally friendly products increased (Faire, 2023) and since they would pay more for green products (Sustainable Brands, 2022).

Consumers' perception of a firm and a product is essential (Aji & Sutikno, 2015). If the public recognizes that an organization is engaging in greenwashing, they form negative opinions towards the company (Ioannou et al., 2023). On the other hand, consumers usually do not know when an organization is doing greenwashing and might doubt some green-claimed products and the company selling them (Aji & Sutikno, 2015). Hence, consumers also started to suspect the companies' green marketing strategies (Aji & Sutikno, 2015). However, some studies do not support this. Ioannou et al. (2022) found that consumers know and perceive organizations' greenwashing practices.

However, although nowadays people are more informed about the environmental situation (Aji & Sutikno, 2015), in some countries, they are not fully aware of the climate emergency (Somerville, 2011). Therefore, implementing green campaigns might increase consumers' sustainability literacy (Santos et al., 2023). In this way, consumers will be more able to acknowledge when greenwashing is happening and be more careful when buying green products (Santos et al., 2023).

Greenwashing perceptions are linked to consumers' recognition that companies employ green advertising primarily for revenues and as a component of their business strategy (Aji & Sutikno, 2015). Perceived greenwashing practices depend on consumers' perceptions and prior experience with the organization (Ioannou et al., 2023) and might have two directions. Consumers might see a misalignment between what the company promises and the actual actions (Monks, 2023), or they could think that there is a benefit for the organization in doing so, such as profit (Ioannou et al., 2022) or enhancing their reputation (Siltaoja, 2006). Therefore, consumers are found to prefer when firms publicize less

sustainability campaigns, as it makes them perceive less greenwashing (Farooq & Wicaksono, 2021).

The environmental promises companies make consist of sustainability information, which is information "*provided by companies on the wider economic, environmental, social and ethical impacts of their activities*" (Rowbottom & Lymer, 2009, p. 176). It facilitates the organization in publicizing a positive corporate image (Martínez & Rodríguez del Bosque, 2014). Sustainability information might be positive, mainly when delivered from the company. In the present research, the company considered is Coca-Cola Co. However, many web articles are found to contrast the company's messages, presenting negative sustainability information.

Literature suggests that negative information has a stronger influence on consumers than positive information (Kahneman & Tversky, 1979; Jonkman et al., 2020). Since people concentrate more on avoiding loss than on potential gains (Kahneman & Tversky, 1979), when negative and positive information are present, the positive one is often disregarded (Sohn & Lariscy, 2015). Moreover, according to Basdeo et al. (2006), information about a company influences consumers' reputation and beliefs. Therefore, the following hypothesis states:

H1: Negative sustainability information will trigger more consumers' perception of greenwashing than positive sustainability information.

Prior Reputation

Literature suggests that companies with a positive reputation were less inclined to face considerable reputational harm when a negative event happened (Love & Kraatz, 2009; Park & Rogan, 2019). This implies that positive prior reputation might mitigate the negative effect of bad happenings on consumers' perception (Zavyalova et al., 2012), especially when stakeholders perceive these happenings to have been expected and manageable (Wei et al.,

2017). Reputation is "*a collective social judgment regarding the quality or capabilities of a focal actor within a specific domain*" (Boivie et al., 2016, p. 188), and in this study, reputation regards the brand Coca-Cola Co. Consumers' prior reputation was considered to investigate whether it could act as a buffer also in the sustainability field.

According to Peasley et al. (2021), a positive prior experience minimizes the negative effects of the organization's unethical actions. In this case, consumers will be more likely to tolerate the company's wrongdoing (Aaker et al., 2004). This can be explained by the cognitive dissonance theory (Sohn & Lariscy, 2015). The latter happens when people favor information that aligns with their pre-existing beliefs (Sohn & Lariscy, 2015), resulting in the confirmatory bias (Sohn & Lariscy, 2015). Furthermore, a study by Ioannou et al. (2022) observed that consumers were more likely to forgive greenwashing practices of brands they trusted and had a high reputation for. On the other hand, they distrusted other companies that engaged in greenwashing. According to the same study, this might imply that when a product or organization has a certain reputation, consumer trust and positive prior experience might reduce the negative effects of greenwashing practices.

Regarding the environmental matter, it is vital to define prior sustainability reputation. The latter is vital for firms nowadays as it is not only necessary to "*attract and retain customers, reduce costs*," but it also "*improve their overall reputation*." (Northern Power System, 2023, para. 1). Nowadays, consumers are asking for sustainable organizations (Double A Paper, 2019). Therefore, prior sustainability reputation was considered in the present research. Hence, prior reputation and prior sustainability reputation could play a crucial role in determining how consumers perceive greenwashing practices (i.e., Coca-Cola Co.). Prior reputation was measured using an adapted scale by Maxham and Netemeyer (2002). Prior sustainability reputation was measured using an adapted scale by De Leaniz and Del Bosque (2013). Therefore, the following hypotheses will state:

H2: The effect of negative sustainability information on perceived greenwashing will be stronger for people with negative prior reputation and negative prior sustainability reputation about Coca-Cola Co. than people with positive prior reputation and positive prior sustainability reputation.

Sustainability Literacy

Sustainability is often a complex matter to assess (Nemes et al., 2022) which requires some knowledge and that not all people have at the same level (Kuehl et al., 2023). People are increasingly required to possess sustainability literacy (Murray & Colgrave, 2007). Sustainability Literacy "*is demonstrating one's awareness of issues that destabilize local and global relationships between economy, environment, and society, and having the information and knowledge necessary to make positive contributions*" (Kansas State University, n.d.). People who are considered "*sustainability literate*" should have: "*discipline-specific sustainability knowledge, discipline-specific sustainability skills, generic sustainability knowledge, generic sustainability skills and sustainability relevant values"* (Murray & Colgrave, 2007, p. 10). However, it can be challenging to build sustainability literacy, as sustainable development is complicated (United Nations, 2019). One way to improve people's sustainability literacy might be by implementing green campaigns (Santos et al., 2023).

In recent years, green knowledge has become widespread in the marketing literature (Sharma, 2021). It has been defined as a crucial concept in the decision-making process of an eco-friendly purchase (Chan, 1999), as the level of consumers' green knowledge might influence the green purchase (Sharma, 2021). According to Peattie and Charter (2012), the more knowledge, the more intention to buy green items. However, the opposite might happen: the more people know, the more they will be concerned about the truthfulness of green claims (Peattie, 2001). The lack of knowledge and the presence of deceitful

information reduce green consumer action (Vicente-Molina et al., 2013). For these reasons, truthful communication is vital (Tan, 2011). Therefore, it might be relevant to create green values using green communication to stimulate consumers' "*rationality and emotions*" (Mostafa, 2007, p. 225).

Case Study: Coca-Cola Co.

Greenwashing has become a usual practice of firms (Terrascope, 2023) also due to the stakeholders' expectations on the environmental matter (Corsini, 2023). Greenwashing happens especially in big companies (Laville, 2022). One of the most famous companies in the world is Coca-Cola Co. This brand has faced different problems due to greenwashing. Indeed, defining Coca-Cola Co. as sustainable is sometimes difficult (St. Laurent University, n.d.). The brand is known for having produced three "*million metric tons of plastic packaging*" in 2019 (Tigue, 2022, para. 5) and 120 billion disposable plastic bottles annually (Greenpeace International, 2022). It is certain that Coca-Cola Co., like the other big companies, should stop producing plastic. Nevertheless, Coca-Cola Co. declared that they will continue using plastic as "*many consumers still prefer it*" (Bandoim, 2020, para. 1) and as "*business will not be in business if we do not accommodate consumers*" (Bandoim, 2020, para. 2), promising, however, to "*make its products from 50% recycled materials by 2030*" (Bandoim, 2020, para. 1).

The brand faced problems as its advertisements were considered misleading (Verdant Law, 2023). Their emotional campaigns regard, for example, plastic pollution, water clean-up, and recycling. It is difficult to believe that Coca-Cola Co. is fighting plastic pollution when it is considered the *world's biggest plastic polluter* (Laville, 2022). Therefore, Coca-Cola Co.'s campaigns do not reflect their actual actions.

However, positive and negative sustainability information about Coca-Cola Co. is present on the Internet. The negative sustainability information might highlight these

deceitful practices influencing consumers' greenwashing perceptions. On the other hand, positive sustainability information about large-scale sustainable programs, such as the Replenish Africa Initiative (RAIN), might let consumers develop a positive reputation for the brand. For these reasons, Coca-Cola Co. is the brand chosen for the current research.

Method

This study aimed to investigate how negative sustainability information about Coca-Cola Co. impacts consumers' greenwashing perceptions and whether positive prior reputation and prior sustainability reputation might act as moderators. In the present research, a 2x1 scenario was conducted. Participants were randomly assigned to two conditions: positive sustainability information and negative sustainability information.

Participants

To select participants, a convenient non-probability sampling method was used. Participants were contacted via Instagram stories, WhatsApp messages, and LinkedIn messages and posts. They had to speak and understand English to participate in this study, as it was held entirely in this language for a more straightforward analysis. They had to know Coca-Cola Co. and prior experience with the brand. A total of 224 participants responded to the survey. However, only 140 participants were considered in the current study for several reasons (e.g., consent was not given, never drank Coca-Cola, many answers were missing).

Materials

According to Obermiller et al. (2005), consumers tend to be more skeptical about advertising among the different types of communication. Therefore, sustainability Coca-Cola Co. advertising was chosen as the experiment's stimulus material due to its notable environmental scandals. The brand's sustainability campaigns were presented to participants in all conditions. However, after the video, half of participants were presented with a positive website article about Coca-Cola Co.'s sustainable practices to support the sustainability

campaign just shown. Conversely, the other half was presented with a negative website article on Coca-Cola Co.'s greenwashing practices, contrasting the sustainability campaign shown before.

Coca-Cola Co. Sustainability Campaign Video

The video presented is *Protecting Waterways through "World Without Waste,"* and it has been chosen among the others as it introduces the plastic pollution and water pollution problems (see Figure 1), which are the two most significant issues of Coca-Cola Co. With this campaign, Coca-Cola Co. aims to show that they take action to save the environment, particularly the waters in Central America. The brand wants to act through a campaign called *World Without Waste*, showing that it is possible to make a world without waste by recycling its bottles and cans (see Figure 2).

Figure 1

Protecting Waterways through "World Without Waste" Campaign

Note. Adapted from *Protecting Waterways through "World Without Waste"* [Screenshot], by Coca-Cola Co. 2018, *YouTube*, (https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Dx64wtshZdU&list=PLXSGSlneuyeHzpMswGyUQmVf_A8yjbb2x&index=23).

Figure 2

World Without Waste Campaign

Note. Adapted from *World Without Waste* [Screenshot], by Coca-Cola Co. 2018, *YouTube*, (https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=MD6ORHLbaAA&list=PLXSGSlneuyeHzpMswGyUQmVf_A8yjbb2x&index=13).

Positive Information: Coca-Cola Co.'s Positive Environmental Impact

A positive website article was shown to half of participants during the experiment to support Coca-Cola Co.'s sustainability campaign (see Appendix A). Since some people, when confronted with news, might want to check the sources, the source of this article is the WWF, an organization that takes care of the environment. Therefore, it is assumed that if this type of association writes about the positive environmental impact of Coca-Cola Co., consumers would be more likely to believe the video shown before and have no greenwashing perceptions, as WWF confirms what they claim.

Negative Information: Coca-Cola Co.'s Sustainability Practices

Conversely, negative information about Coca-Cola Co.'s sustainability practices was presented to the other half of participants (see Appendix A). Also this article had a reliable source (i.e., The Guardian) as newspapers are supposed to report attested information. This article is named *Coca-Cola among brands greenwashing over packaging, report says*. It notified consumers about the brand's greenwashing practices in order to see whether negative

information impacts consumers' greenwashing perception and whether prior reputation and prior sustainability reputation act as moderators.

Measures

Prior Reputation Measurement Scale

An adapted scale was used to measure consumers' prior reputation about Coca-Cola Co. (see Appendix B). It was adjusted from an existing scale (i.e., Maxham & Netemeyer, 2002). The scale posed seven statements, such as *I am satisfied with my overall experience with Coca-Cola*. The response options were based on a 7-point Likert scale ranging from 1 "*Strongly disagree*" to 7 "*Strongly agree*". The scale's mean was 4.40 (*SD* = 1.57), and the scale's reliability was good, α = .93.

Prior Sustainability Reputation Measurement Scale

To measure prior sustainability reputation, an adapted scale by De Leaniz and Del Bosque (2013) was used (see Appendix C). It consisted of seven items. The response options were based on a 7-point Likert ranging from 1 "*Strongly disagree*" to 7 "*Strongly agree*". The scale's mean was 3.99 (*SD* = 1.14), and the scale's reliability was good, α = .91.

Greenwashing Perception Measurement Scale

To measure consumers' greenwashing perception, an adapted scale from Zhang et al. (2018) was used (see Appendix D). There were 11 statements, and the response options were based on a 7-point Likert scale, ranging from 1 "*Strongly disagree*" to 7 "*Strongly agree*". This scale was presented at the end of the experiment to measure greenwashing perception and to compare, later in the analysis, whether there was any influence of negative sustainability information. The scale's mean was 3.37 (*SD* = 1.28), and the scale's reliability was good, α = .92. Before doing the reliability analysis, statements 4, 5, 7, and 8 were recoded.

Procedure

The experiment was conducted in November 2023 using the Qualtrics platform. The study lasted approximately 15 minutes and was held in English. Participants were contacted via Instagram stories, WhatsApp messages, and LinkedIn messages and posts. Depending on their availability, participants were able to participate in the experiment whenever it was suitable for them.

In the beginning, the topic of the study was mentioned in the introduction (see Appendix E), and the informed consent was presented (see Appendix F). Participants confirmed their participation by checking the answer "*Yes, I agree to participate*" at the end of the informed consent. After accepting to participate in the study, they started the online survey. First, six demographic questions were asked (e.g., age, gender, nationality).

After, the experiment was divided into three parts. The first was the same for all conditions and asked questions about participants' opinion on Coca-Cola Co. (e.g., *I am satisfied with my overall experience with Coca-Cola Co.*) through the prior reputation and prior sustainability reputation measurement scales. This determined their prior reputation on the brand. In the second part, the positive sustainability Coca-Cola Co. advertising was presented and was the same for every participant.

However, the third part was different. Half of the participants were presented with a positive article from the WWF confirming the positive environmental impact of Coca-Cola Co. After the article, they had to answer some survey questions about greenwashing perceptions, and they were not notified about Coca-Cola Co.'s greenwashing practices. Contrarily, the other half was presented with information contrasting the previous advertising. A negative website article from a reliable source (i.e., The Guardian) was presented to participants and stated about Coca-Cola Co.'s greenwashing practices. Participants had to answer the same questions of participants with positive sustainability information but

knowing about the brand's misconduct. Data was analyzed utilizing the Jamovi program v.2.3.28 and an independent samples *t*-test and three moderation analyses were performed. This structured the result section.

Results

In the result section, the study findings will be analyzed. The present research aimed to investigate whether negative sustainability information about Coca-Cola Co. impacts consumers' greenwashing perception and whether positive prior reputation and prior sustainability reputation might protect against negative sustainability information. Firstly, the descriptives will be assessed. Then, the hypotheses will next be examined, along with an additional moderation analysis.

Descriptives

Reputation of Coca-Cola Co. among participants was more positive than negative (M = 4.40, SD = 1,57). The average on the 7-point Likert Scale was higher than the neutral answer (i.e., "4") meaning that those who scored higher than "4" had a higher reputation about Coca-Cola Co. People who thought positively about the brand were the 65.5%, and people who thought negatively were the 35.5%, confirming that participants had a positive reputation about Coca-Cola Co.

Regarding participants' prior sustainability reputation, 50.3% of participants thought positively and 49.3% negatively of Coca-Cola Co. (M = 3.99, SD = 1.14). This indicates that on average, participants held a rather neutral opinion. The greenwashing perception's average (M = 3.37, SD = 1.28) indicates that greenwashing, after the video and the information, was perceived by many participants. Hence, there are people that really believe that Coca-Cola Co. is engaging in greenwashing (65%). To measure participants' Coca-Cola consumption, the number of glasses they drink per week was asked (M = 2.40, SD = 4.07). Answers were very different. Most people (90.2%) drink between 0 and 5 glasses per week. However, some

outliers were present. Indeed, some people (n = 9) said to drink between 10 and 21 glasses per week. The latter were defined as habitual drinkers.

Testing Hypothesis 1: Independent Samples *t*-test

To test whether negative sustainability information triggers greenwashing perceptions more than positive sustainability information, an independent samples t-test was performed. The normality and homogeneity assumptions were met: Shapiro-Wilk' test (p = .219) and Levene's test (p = .844). On average, negative sustainability information triggers more greenwashing perceptions (M = 3.03, SD = 1.19) than positive sustainability information (M = 3.77, SD = 1.27). This difference was significant, $Mdif$ = .74, $t(1, 138) = -3.57$, $p < .001$, BCa 95% CI [-.950, -0.257], d = -0.605. This represents a small sized effect. Therefore, there was a main effect of negative sustainability information. The confidence intervals do not cross zero. This supports the hypothesis that negative sustainability information triggers more greenwashing perceptions than positive sustainability information.

Testing Hypothesis 2: Moderation Analysis

Prior Reputation

To test whether the effect of negative sustainability information on perceived greenwashing is stronger for people with negative prior reputation about Coca-Cola Co. than people with positive prior reputation, a moderation analysis (simple slope) was conducted. The interaction effect between sustainability information and prior reputation was not significant (p = .313, Z = 1.01, df = 137) and the effect size was small, d = 0.35. Therefore, participants' prior opinion of Coca-Cola Co. did not work as a buffer when presented with greenwashing information. Hence, the second hypothesis is not supported.

Prior Sustainability Reputation

To test whether the effect of negative sustainability information on perceived greenwashing is stronger for people with negative prior sustainability reputation about

Coca-Cola Co. than people with positive prior sustainability reputation, a moderation analysis (simple slope) was conducted. The interaction effect between sustainability information and prior sustainability reputation was not significant ($p = .313$, $Z = -0.114$, $df = 137$) and the effect size was small, $d = -.04$. Therefore, participants' prior sustainability opinion of Coca-Cola Co. did not work as a buffer when presented with greenwashing information. Hence, the second hypothesis is not supported.

Additional Analysis: Consumption Behavior

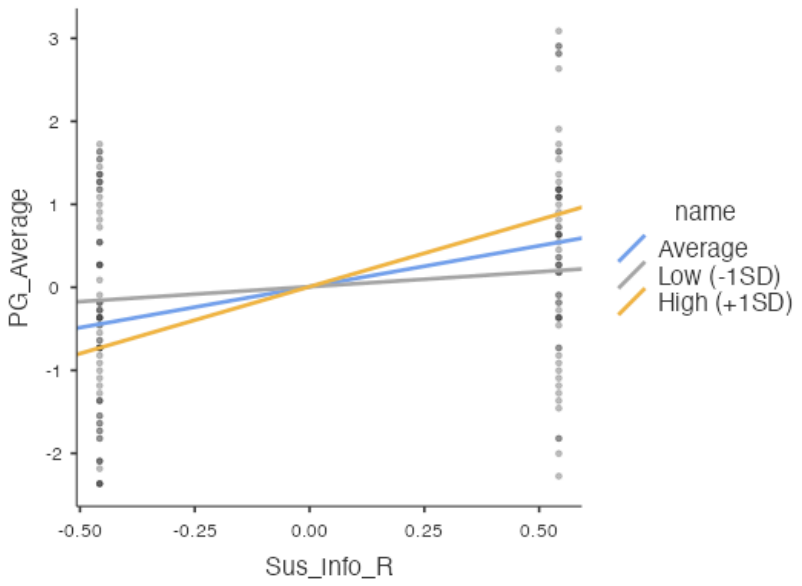
Since prior reputation and prior sustainability information did not strengthen the relationship between sustainability information and greenwashing perception, an additional analysis was conducted, exploring whether the consumption behavior may affect the strength of the effect. According to a study conducted by Chang (2012), the efficacy of communication in its different forms, such as advertising, depends on product use frequency. The idea being that consumers are more emotionally involved with the brands they buy and use. The research indicated that individuals characterized as habitual users demonstrated higher emotional involvement compared to light users. Consequently, they responded stronger to information. This was posited to contribute to a lower negative perception of purchase-oriented communication. Therefore, an additional analysis was performed, and the findings of the present research similarly aligns with the study conducted by Chang (2012), as habitual Coca-Cola drinkers perceived more greenwashing from the brand than light drinkers.

To test whether prior consumption behavior makes a difference in people's interpretation of new information, a moderation analysis (simple slope) was conducted. The moderation estimates were significant for sustainability information ($p < .001$, $Z = 4.74$, $df = 137$), consumption behavior ($p < .001$, $Z = 5.79$, $df = 137$) and for the interaction between the two variables ($p = .004$, $Z = 2.85$, $df = 137$). The effect size was large, $d = 1.25$. Participants

who were identified as light Coca-Cola drinkers were categorized in the group *Low* (-1 SD), whereas habitual Coca-Cola drinkers were categorized in the group *High* (+1 SD). The slopes show that consumers who are light drinkers of Coca-Cola did not change their opinion after being presented with positive or negative information. This can be seen in Figure 3. This means that people who are not regular Coca-Cola drinkers are less susceptible to the information presented to them as they do not drink the beverage anyways, hence they are less emotionally involved, according to Chang (2012). Conversely, habitual drinkers of Coca-Cola changed their greenwashing assessment after being presented with negative information, indicating a more greenwashing perception. This means that the effect of sustainability information depends on product usage, but not on people's reputation about Coca-Cola Co., as it was expected in the beginning.

Figure 3

Interaction Effect Between Sustainability Information and Consumption Behavior



Note. PG_Average stands for Perceived Greenwashing Average and Sus_Info_R stands for Sustainability Information.

Discussion and Conclusion

The current research brings to light three different contributions to our understanding of greenwashing perception, which will be explained in this section. The first regards the use of sustainability information in the formation of greenwashing perception. The second concerns the reasons why prior reputation and prior sustainability reputation did not buffer the influence of sustainability information in this experiment. Conversely, the last regards why consumers' behavior buffers the effect of sustainability information. After, the practical implications that were extrapolated from the experiment's findings will be discussed and, lastly, the methodological discussion will be examined.

Contributions

First Contribution: The Main Effect of Sustainability Information on Greenwashing Perception

This study's first contribution is that negative sustainability information impacts consumers' greenwashing perception. This confirms that people use the information in the public arena to make assessments, in this case, about greenwashing practices. Given the statistical significance of the analysis performed ($p < .001$), it is possible to state that participants infer greenwashing when confronted with negative sustainability information and sustainability advertising. This can be explained through the concept of the *agenda-setting*. The latter states that the media shapes what people see as important news and decides which news gets more attention (Brosius & Haas, 2011). Hence, according to Zamith (n.d.), people will find a problem more significant depending on how much attention the media gives to it. Indeed, people might not even have taken sustainability practices into account until it was presented to them in the experimental material through the video and the news articles. This is called *issue saliency* (Zamith, n.d.). Sustainability has become more relevant in the news

(Barkemeyer et al., 2018). However, different sustainability topics have different levels of public attention (Barkemeyer et al., 2018).

According to Wu and Coleman (2009), in the agenda-setting theory, there are two levels: the first states that what is a lot on the media are the things people think of and worry about the most. The second concerns the connections people make between the information and the product they are using. In this case, if Coca-Cola Co. is always presented in a negative way and is accused of being one of the leading polluters in the world, then people will draw conclusions about its pollution and will automatically see Coca-Cola Co.'s sustainability claims as greenwashing.

Furthermore, people find it hard to assess information (Stevenson University, n.d). One reason might be that it is difficult to tell whether a company is performing greenwashing, as it is not always a straightforward matter to assess (Nemes et al., 2022). Different baselines exist to judge brands' green practices. For example, using sentences like *42% CO2 emissions reduction compared to the previous version* (Adidas, n.d.), *by not flushing you save XXX liters of water* (McDonald's, n.d.), *100% of recycled plastic by 2025* (Garnier, n.d.). Hence, the choice of a baseline as a way to compare can inform a greenwashing decision (European Commission, 2023). Moreover, firms also use trademarks to declare their green actions. Therefore, consumers can also use those to assess whether a brand is doing greenwashing or not. However, skepticism around those trademarks exist (Maggiore, 2021). Therefore, having an excellent public relations department within the company can help spread positive information to consumers (Siporski, 2023) to clarify their doubts and concerns.

Second Contribution: The reasons Behind Prior Reputation and Prior Sustainability Reputation Not Working as Buffers in The Relationships with Perceived Greenwashing

The second contribution this study brings is that prior reputation and prior sustainability reputation, in the current experiment, did not work as buffers. This might be

because the source of the sustainability information given was too strong and too reliable to go against (i.e., WWF for the positive sustainability information and The Guardian for the negative sustainability information). Therefore, it was difficult for participants to ignore the information that was presented due to its credibility.

However, given the forced experimental setting, this might be due also to the relatively high need for cognition people might have. The need for cognition is "*a psychological construct that concerns an individual's tendency and enjoyment in seeking, evaluating, and integrating multiple relevant sources of information toward making sense of their surroundings. It captures the extent to which individuals chronically engage in effortful reflection in arriving at an opinion or tend to form an opinion based on cursory or superficial aspects*" (Bauer & Stiner, 2020, p. 3123). Therefore, in the current experiment, some people may have *over-thought* and tried to understand the problem more than other people, indicating a higher level of need for cognition. Also because, given the experimental nature, the concept of greenwashing was introduced to participants by the researcher, thus participants might not even have considered greenwashing before being presented with questions about it. Contrarily, some people did not want to understand the problem, ignoring the information provided, which might be also for a people's need to avoid negative information (Senz, 2021). However, some of the participants might really like Coca-Cola Co. This might have led them to ignore the negative information regarding the issue, as people might accept the information, which is in line with their prior credence, rather than something contradicting (Glick, 2017). This is what is called confirmation bias (Nickerson, 1998).

Nevertheless, in the current experiment people who liked Coca-Cola Co., as they were identified as habitual drinkers, reported to be more critical of its greenwashing practices and therefore suggesting a more rational and thoughtful process. The majority of participants was highly educated (70,8%). According to Liu and Nesbit (2014), higher educated people might

be more in need of cognition than lower educated people. Therefore, future studies might investigate what would have happened if more people with lower education participated in the experiment.

Third Contribution: Consumers' Behavior Works as a Buffer

Findings revealed statistical significance ($p < .001$) for the analysis conducted to explore whether product usage explained the strength of the effect of negative sustainability information on perceived greenwashing. This might be due to several reasons. Firstly, information might not seem relevant to consumers as they might believe their behavior does not have an impact on the environment (Huang, 2016) although, in reality, it does (Active Sustainability, n.d.). Therefore, an ethical discussion might emerge regarding consumers' responsibility for consuming a product.

Moreover, findings showed that habitual drinkers were more interested than light drinkers in the sustainability information provided. This might explain why a brand might lose trust due to the information it receives. Light drinkers were not interested in the information provided as they were not very interested in the brand itself and perceived it not to impact their purchase choices as they drink it infrequently. Conversely, habitual drinkers were interested in the information. They probably reflected on their actions and behavior, reasoning that their behavior (i.e., Coca Cola consumption) might have an impact, but they also reflected on the brand's actions regarding sustainability and environmental impact.

Furthermore, it is possible to talk about psychological involvement. Supposing that consumers feel psychologically involved in the cause (i.e., environmental impact) (Mock et al., 2019), negative sustainability information will have a more significant effect, as the findings showed that those who were particularly interested in the brand were more impacted by the information received. This mechanism is stronger than the buffering effect of prior reputation and prior sustainability reputation as it is a rational reasoning (Rovira, 2018).

However, some issues might arise, such as social desirability. Participants might have changed their answers due to the urge to seem caring about the environment, whereas they might not or do a little. Hence, giving false answers.

If consumers perceive a brand engaging in greenwashing, they might boycott it (George, 2023). This happens because consumers are responsible for their choices and purchase behavior (Active Sustainability, n.d.) and also because consumption is identity (Manchiraju, 2018) and value-driven (Burns, 2017). People want to support ethical companies (Am et al., 2023). For example, this can be linked to what is happening with the Israel-Palestine conflict, as consumers' choices can also be political (Micheletti & Boström, 2014). Consumers in favor of Palestine started to boycott brands that were supporting Israel. This highlights the power consumers have on brands to support or boycott them.

Practical Implications

In marketing, habitual users are often considered the perfect ambassadors for the brand as they are "loyal and committed" and will suggest the brand to other people (Spitz, n.d., para. 8), such as friends and family, but also through social networks. However, the current findings suggest that habitual users are also the strongest critics. As mentioned in the introduction, one of the contributions the current study might bring is revealing situational factors that influence or make consumers skeptical. Findings suggest that it is habitual consumption to make consumers change their opinion and their thoughts, rather than prior attitudes towards the brand.

Furthermore, this study contributes to understanding the cognitive processes underlying consumer skepticism and loyalty (Quicanga, 2023). Consumers who changed their opinion or thought about the issue presented probably also had a stronger need for cognition. Companies might use these findings to understand how habitual consumers behave and think and that they are not necessarily the best brand ambassadors.

Firms know that negative information has a weight on what their consumers perceive and think, therefore, directors might want to be cautious when disclosing sustainability information about their company. Therefore, engaging in excellent public relations is important to spread positive information about the brand (Siporski, 2023). However, according to Vallentin (2002), the more companies engage in CSR activities the more denounced they are. Hence, the best solution would be to be honest on the actions taken, since people might perceive greenwashing anyway.

Methodological Discussion

Regarding the methodology of this study, there are three limitations. The first one is the educational level of participants. People who participated in the experiment were mostly highly educated (70,8%), thus establishing an unequal division between the various levels of education. As mentioned before, this might have influenced the results. Some people might have had a higher need for cognition, others might have been more prepared for the argument since they had a higher education, other people might have been more proficient in English due to their studies. Therefore, for future studies, it might be wise to have people with more varied educational backgrounds.

The second limitation regarding the study's methodology is the fact that, in the survey, the manipulation check was not added. The reason is that the two texts shown to participants were very clearly negative or positive. Therefore, a question stating whether they have read a negative or positive article was not included. Although we cannot be completely sure whether they have interpreted the text correctly, it was very straightforward whether it was a positive or negative article. However, in a natural setting, it might happen that the information presented is mixed (i.e., containing both negative and positive sustainability information). Hence, future studies might consider adding this type of sustainability information. Furthermore, this might reflect on the ecological validity of the experiment.

Participants were required to read the article as they were in an experimental environment, so we cannot assess whether they would have read the article anyway. Especially regarding light Coca-Cola drinkers, who reported to not be involved in the information provided. Moreover, since participants were part of an experiment, they might have paid more attention, or they have responded to questions in a way that is considered socially desirable. Therefore, we cannot be completely sure of what participants' answers would have been outside of an experiment setting or what their real answers would have been if nobody would have read them.

The third main limitation regards the brand chosen. Coca-Cola Co. is one of the biggest brands of the world. People trust more small brands over the bigger ones (SignalTheory, 2019; Farooq & Wicaksono, 2021). Furthermore, Coca-Cola Co. is often seen as a symbol of capitalism (Pirie, 2019), implying that the brand might do anything to increase its sales. Therefore, future studies might consider using small brands as case study to explore whether the current findings apply also to smaller companies or might differ.

In conclusion, despite social desirability and the experimental setting, in the current study it was not found support for prior reputation and prior sustainability reputation about a brand to moderate the relationship between greenwashing perception and sustainability information. However, it was discovered that people who were more emotionally involved made more assessments regarding greenwashing perception and that consumption has the greatest impact on greenwashing perception. Therefore, it is important to consider that habitual consumers are not always the best ambassadors for the brand and that it might depend on several causes. There remain promising avenues for future research following the insight gained in this study.

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Appendix A

Sustainability Information about Coca-Cola Co.

Positive Information	Negative Information
With global plastic pollution accelerating, in 2019, WWF launched ReSource: Plastic (ReSource), a collaborative platform that convenes leading companies to create and activate programs and solutions to keep plastic in the supply loop and out of the natural environment. The platform involves a first-of-its-kind effort to quantify corporate impact and track company actions and opportunities to reduce plastic waste. Through ReSource, of which The Coca-Cola Company is a Principal Member, WWF and members aim to help prevent around 10 million metric tons of the world's plastic waste pollution. WWF estimates as few as 100 companies have the potential to make this goal a reality. ReSource is helping companies align their large-scale plastic commitments from aspiration to meaningful, measurable action. Through its participation, the company will collaborate across industries to ensure a systems-based approach to addressing plastic production, consumption, waste management, and recycling as a single system. Developed in partnership with The Coca-Cola Company and other ReSource	Claims about plastic packaging being eco-friendly made by big brands, including Coca-Cola, are misleading greenwashing, according to a report. The Changing Markets Foundation says claims that companies are intercepting and using “ocean-bound” or “recyclable” plastic to tackle the plastic pollution crisis are some of the most common examples of greenwashing. The claims are made with little proof about how the products address the crisis in plastic pollution, their report says. It says this is done to obscure the real impact of plastic from consumers. Coca-Cola, the report says, has spent millions promoting an innovation which says that its bottles are 25% marine plastic, but does not mention that the company is the *world’s biggest plastic polluter*. This shows that brands are presenting materials and selling products claiming they are better for the environment when they are either difficult to recycle, not recyclable at all, or are using just a small fraction of “ocean-bound” plastic collected through various clean-ups. Source: The Guardian

Principal Members, the Transparent 2020 baseline report measures and examines the plastic footprints of these leading global companies and provides a detailed look at the challenges and potential solutions for tackling the plastic pollution problem. Source: WWF website	

Appendix B

Prior Reputation Measurement Scale

Statement	Source
1. I am satisfied with my overall experience with Coca-Cola.	Maxham and Netemeyer, (2002)
2. I spread positive word-of-mouth about Coca-Cola.	
3. I would recommend Coca-Cola to my friends.	
4. If my friends were looking for a soft drink, I would suggest Coca-Cola.	
5. In the future, I intend to continue drinking Coca-Cola.	
6. I have high expectations about Coca-Cola.	
7. I expect Coca-Cola to do whatever it takes to guarantee my satisfaction.	

Appendix C

Prior Sustainability Reputation Measurement Scale

Statement	Source
1. Coca-Cola Co. protects the environment. 2. Coca-Cola Co. reduces its consumption of natural resources. 3. Coca-Cola Co. recycles. 4. Coca-Cola Co. communicates to its customers its environmental practices. 5. Coca-Cola Co. conducts annual environmental audits. 6. Coca-Cola Co. exploits renewable energy in a productive process compatible with the environment. 7. Coca-Cola Co. participates in environmental certifications.	De Leaniz and Del Bosque, (2013)

Appendix D

Greenwashing Perception Measurement Scale

Statement	Source
1. I would highly recommend Coca-Cola to others because of its environmental image.	Zhang et al. (2018)
2. I would positively recommend Coca-Cola to others because of its environmental functionality.	
3. I would encourage others to purchase Coca-Cola because it is environmentally-friendly.	
4. Coca-Cola overstates or exaggerates what its green functionality actually is.	
5. Coca-Cola misleads with words regarding its environmental features.	
6. I would say good things about Coca-Cola to others because of its environmental performance.	
7. Coca-Cola is associated with a green claim that is vague or seemingly un-provable.	
8. Coca-Cola leaves out or masks important information, making the green claim sound better than it is.	
9. I will purchase Coca-Cola because of its environmental concern.	
10. I am willing to buy Coca-Cola because of its environmental performance.	
11. I am happy to purchase Coca-Cola because they are environmentally friendly.	

Appendix E

Introduction

Dear Participant,

You are invited to take part in an experiment about consumers' perceptions to understand the thoughts and opinions people might have regarding a brand in certain situations. This experiment is directed to everyone who has had experience with the brand, is above the age of 18 and speaks English.

This experiment is part of the final thesis. It is conducted by Ylenia Mami, a Master's student at Tilburg University, under Dr. Joost Verhoeven's supervision from the Tilburg School of Digital Humanities, Department of Communication and Cognition. It will take approximately 15 minutes to complete.

In case of any questions, please contact me by email: y.mami@tilburguniversity.edu

Thank you for your participation!

Appendix F

Informed Consent

Description of research: You will participate in an experiment which aims to investigate participants' thoughts and opinions about a brand.

Participation: Your participation is completely voluntary. You can stop anytime without any explanation and skip questions you feel uncomfortable with. You will be asked a series of questions regarding your experience with the brand.

Privacy and confidentiality: Your data will be completely anonymous. Your data will not easily lead to your identification and your responses will be completely anonymous following GDPR rules.

If you want to participate, please tick "*Yes, I agree to participate*". In this way, you let me collect your data and answers. If you do not want to participate anymore, you are free to leave.

Thank you again for your participation!