

The Effect of Greenwashing on Boycott Intention and Negative Word-of-Mouth: The Moderating Role of Environmental Concern

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KEYWORDS <i>Greenwashing, Boycott intention, Green skepticism, Environmental concern, Negative word-of-mouth</i>	ABSTRACT This research investigates the effect of greenwashing on consumer behavior and particularly on boycott intention and negative word of mouth, while also analyzing the moderating role of environmental concern. A conceptual model was developed from the proposed hypotheses based on the theory of reasoned action. The data of this study were collected by an online survey of 322 Tunisian consumers that are familiar with fast-fashion brands. Partial least squares structural equation modeling (PLS-SEM) was used to analyze data and test the direct, mediation and moderation relationships. The results indicate that greenwashing exerts a positive impact on consumers' intention to boycott, which subsequently influences negative word-of-mouth. Moreover, boycott intentions fully mediate the linkage between greenwashing and negative word-of-mouth. Furthermore, the findings show that environmental concern significantly moderates the effect of greenwashing on negative word of mouth, along with the causal relationship between consumers' boycott intention and negative word of mouth. This research contributes to the growing consumer behavior literature on greenwashing, as it provides new insights concerning consumer retaliation behaviors in the context of fast fashion and particularly in an emerging market in the MENA region. This study also yields a set of valuable recommendations for businesses, emphasizing the crucial role of authenticity and transparency in the corporate environmental information used by companies. ...
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1. INTRODUCTION

In recent years, practices related to green marketing or sustainable marketing have begun to be popularized and highlighted, both in the literature and in practice. This is largely driven by both the urgency of climate change caused by the harmful effects of polluting practices and the growing consumer interest in various environmental causes, which is reflected in a gradual transition toward eco-responsible consumption behaviors.

This behavioral shift has prompted companies to adopt a sustainable approach, but it has also given rise to the phenomenon of greenwashing, where companies exaggerate or fabricate environmental claims to attract consumers who are more aware and concerned about this



cause (De Jong et al., 2018). Greenwashing is not limited to undermining the integrity of real and genuine ecological actions; it also creates confusion in consumers' minds, which heightens their skepticism about the authenticity of any information conveyed by companies regarding sustainable or green practices (Miao et al., 2023).

Therefore, it is necessary to understand the dynamics of greenwashing and the effects it generates on consumer behaviors, which are of crucial importance both theoretically and practically for companies seeking to adopt a serious sustainable approach. Several authors have examined the attitudes, behaviors, or intentions stemming from this concept. Parguel et al. (2015) and Volschenk et al. (2022) have studied the causes of negative consumer opinions toward companies in relation to environmental causes. On the other hand, Santos et al. (2024) have focused on the different effects of skepticism that consumers may have toward companies' eco-responsible promises and messages.

From a theoretical perspective, this research contributes to the existing literature on greenwashing by integrating the theory of reasoned action model to analyze the different consumer responses to misleading environmental claims. This approach will help construct an overview of the psychological processes underlying environmental skepticism and boycott intention, enriching the understanding of so-called sustainable behaviors (Akturan, 2018).

Furthermore, this research aims to explore the role of consumers' environmental concern as a moderating variable between greenwashing and the different consumer behaviors related to this concept.

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

2.1 The Effect of Greenwashing and Green Skepticism on Consumer Intentions

The term greenwashing was initially used in the 1980s and has since evolved to encompass a set of deceptive marketing practices that falsely convey a form of environmental responsibility on the part of companies (Jones, 2019). According to Netto et al. (2020), the concept of greenwashing is characterized by the use of vague statements, misleading labels, and exaggerated information about certain environmental benefits to give a false impression of concern for sustainability in a company's approach. These organizations that engage in such practices primarily aim to take advantage of the growing consumer preference for environmentally friendly products without actually making substantial changes to their practices (Markham et al., 2014). This practice not only misleads consumers but also raises significant ethical issues and can seriously harm the credibility of brands, even when they are genuinely committed to eco-responsible causes (Seele & Gatti, 2017).

Previous research indicates that greenwashing can manifest in different forms. According to Netto et al. (2020), these include the use of ambiguous language, the display of false certifications, and the selective disclosure of certain information that does not present the full picture of a given practice. Nyilasy et al. (2014) highlight the idea that companies that promote their products as green or eco-friendly while neglecting to publicly disclose the negative and harmful effects of their other practices fuel confusion and skepticism in consumers' minds. This kind of disappointing communication risks seriously harming trust, not only in the brand itself but also in the entire market formed around eco-friendly products, as consumers become increasingly wary of claims that may lack a solid foundation (Sherani et al., 2023).

The implications of greenwashing are extensive in terms of their influence on consumers, both in their attitudes and behaviors. Ha et al. (2022) confirm that when consumers perceive a brand as engaging in such practices, their level of trust in the brand decreases significantly. This erosion of trust can lead to negative consequences in consumer behavior, such as a reduction in purchase intention towards that brand or even, in some cases, a drastic increase in their intention to boycott (Nguyen et al., 2019).

The theory of reasoned action can be considered a fundamental framework for consumer behavior in the context of greenwashing. According to this theory, individuals' behavioral intentions are influenced by their attitudes towards the behavior and the subjective norms surrounding it (Volschenk et al., 2022). In the context of our research, consumers' attitudes can be shaped by their perceptions of companies' eco-friendly claims while considering subjective norms, which are societal expectations for a sustainable approach. This theoretical perspective is particularly relevant as it allows for the exploration of how greenwashing impacts consumers' intentions to engage in eco-responsible behaviors, such as purchasing green products or boycotting brands that use false promises (Gatti et al., 2019).

The term "boycott" appeared at the end of the 19th century when a group of small merchants decided not to buy the products offered by Charles Boycott, an American farmer, to respond to his unreasonable demands (Cruz et al., 2013). According to Neureiter et al. (2024), the intention to boycott refers to the decision made by consumers to stop purchasing a product or service offered by a company perceived as unethical or even deceptive. Even though this practice remains less aggressive when compared to a protest led by an NGO, a company's losses remain tangible. According to Friedman (1999), boycotting mainly depends on consumer motivations and is divided into five types: economic, religious, minority-related, ecological, or linked to working conditions. This notion is particularly relevant when it comes to the context where companies falsely claim a form of eco-responsible approach, thus creating a practice perceived as unethical and potentially leading to a boycott.

Andreoli and Minciotti (2023) state that widespread cases of greenwashing have negatively impacted the overall level of trust in companies' eco-responsible messages, thus encouraging consumers to boycott brands that fail to demonstrate the sincerity of their sustainable approach. Indeed, Qayyum et al. (2023) show that greenwashing tarnishes brand image and



reduces consumer loyalty, which negatively affects the purchase intentions of those who place great importance on sustainable practices. Guerreiro and Pacheco (2021) highlight the idea that consumers are increasingly distrustful and may avoid brands that engage in false promotion of ecological initiatives.

The effect of greenwashing does not stop at reducing purchase intentions but is also responsible for increasing the likelihood that consumers will boycott brands that seem dishonest to them (Wang & Walker, 2023). Moreover, Braga et al. (2019) state that the negative attitudes generated by greenwashing can lead to public expressions of criticism towards the brand, thereby amplifying the dissatisfaction effect. This link raises the potential impact that boycott behavior can have in the form of a ripple effect, which in turn affects the perceptions of other consumers and market players.

Qayyum et al. (2022) also show that greenwashing can predict negative word-of-mouth, as consumers are more inclined to warn others about ambiguous and dishonest practices. This notion refers to any unfavorable communication that consumers share about a brand or a product. This action is generally a reaction to the perception of a form of injustice or disappointment. Balaji et al. (2016) define the concept as a consumer effort to share negative or unfavorable feedback and opinions with friends, family members, as well as other people.

In the context of sustainable marketing, greenwashing can amplify consumers' intentions to spread negative word-of-mouth (Hesse et al., 2022). As for the relationship between greenwashing and negative word-of-mouth, the latter is fueled by the fact that consumers faced with falsely sustainable practices are more likely to share negative opinions with their peers, especially since misleading green marketing practices can generate dissatisfaction and a desire to communicate this sense of injustice (de Vries et al., 2015).

This communication, in turn, affects other consumers' perceptions, who become influenced by negative experiences and the dissatisfaction of others, which can have a harmful effect since consumers tend to rely more on the opinions of their close contacts and peers rather than on the information provided by the companies in question (Bulut et al., 2021).

We therefore propose the following hypotheses:

H1: Greenwashing positively influences the intention to boycott.

H2: Greenwashing positively influences negative word-of-mouth.

H3: The intention to boycott positively influences negative word-of-mouth.

H4: The intention to boycott mediates the relationship between greenwashing and negative word-of-mouth.

Green skepticism refers to consumers' doubts and particularly critical attitudes toward companies' claims regarding their practices (Farooq & Wicaksono, 2021). The concept of green skepticism is primarily fueled by consumers' perceptions of inconsistencies between companies' actual practices and the messages they convey, which strongly influences behavior in a green marketing context. The research by Khan et al. (2022) has highlighted the importance of green skepticism, which plays a mediating role between companies' eco-responsible practices and their impact on brand value, showing that this concept can be intensely harmful to brands seeking to present an eco-responsible identity.

On the other hand, Leonidou and Skarmeas (2015) emphasized the negative impact of green skepticism on purchase intention, demonstrating that consumers are less likely to choose a brand if they perceive it as insincere in its environmental commitments. Moreover, the research context creates drastic variations, as stated by Silva et al. (2020), who argue that while environmental values can significantly predict skepticism in certain regions, knowledge related to this concept does not have the same effect. This means that green skepticism is more rooted in cultural attitudes rather than factual knowledge. The same concept was studied by Akturan and Tezcan (2019), proving that false information disseminated by companies eventually intensifies consumer skepticism, which subsequently affects the entire industry based on green marketing.

All these findings indicate that consumers' environmental concern also plays a fundamental role in these various perceptions. This skepticism mainly stems from negative experiences where consumers have felt deceived by exaggerated environmental claims made by companies (Leonidou & Skarmeas, 2015). As a result, these skeptical consumers become increasingly distrustful of such marketing messages and are therefore more inclined to doubt the credibility of this information, which fosters the intention to boycott brands incapable of genuine sustainable commitment (de Sio et al., 2022). Furthermore, Leonidou and Skarmeas (2015) indicate that the link between environmental skepticism and the intention to boycott is reinforced by the fact that consumers with a higher level of skepticism are more likely to engage in negative word-of-mouth.

Based on this, we propose the following hypotheses:

H5: Green skepticism positively influences the intention to boycott

H6: Green skepticism positively influences negative word-of-mouth

2.2 Environmental Concern as a Moderating Variable

Environmental concern, also called green concern, includes the awareness and all the emotional responses of individuals to environmental issues (Hateftabar and Hall, 2023). This concern can be considered as an important vector of the behaviors and intentions of consumers, especially in the context of purchasing so-called green products. Several researches have



emphasized the importance of this concern and its intensity on the purchase intentions of green products. Fabiola and Mayangsari (2020) demonstrated the positive influence of green concern on the purchase intentions of Generation Z in Indonesia, which highlights a growing awareness of this generation towards environmental concerns. Similarly, Sinha and Annamdevula (2022) demonstrated that knowledge as well as concern related to environmental issues have a positive impact on purchase intentions. This shows that more informed consumers are more likely to develop eco-responsible behaviors.

Furthermore, the importance of green concern in the formation of consumer attitudes is far from negligible. The work of Kahraman and Kazançoğlu (2019) shows that consumers with a high level of green concern are more likely to closely examine and critically assess companies' ecological claims, which significantly increases their skepticism toward those practicing greenwashing. These different studies illustrate the existing dynamics between skepticism, green concern, and the different behaviors of consumers.

This high level of concern amplifies the impact of greenwashing on the intention to boycott because these consumers feel a moral obligation pushing them to act against brands that falsely present their environmental practices as a form of claim against the hypocrisy of these companies. Consumers with increased environmental concern are more likely to react strongly to greenwashing, thus pushing them to generate more negative word-of-mouth since they feel compelled to share their experience by warning others of the deceptive practices they have detected (Bulut et al., 2021).

These authors also highlight the fact that consumers with developed ecological concerns communicate more about their eco-responsible actions, including boycotting brands, to influence their social circles. Mu and Lee (2023) and Teichmann et al. (2023) also studied the moderating relationship that environmental concern can have on the different links between attitudes and environmental behavioral intentions.

Thus, we propose the following hypotheses:

H7: Environmental concern moderates the relationship between greenwashing and the intention to boycott.

H8: Environmental concern moderates the relationship between greenwashing and negative word-of-mouth.

H9: Environmental concern moderates the relationship between the intention to boycott and negative word-of-mouth.

This leads us to propose our conceptual model in **Figure 1. (Insert figure 1 here)**

TABLES AND FIGURES

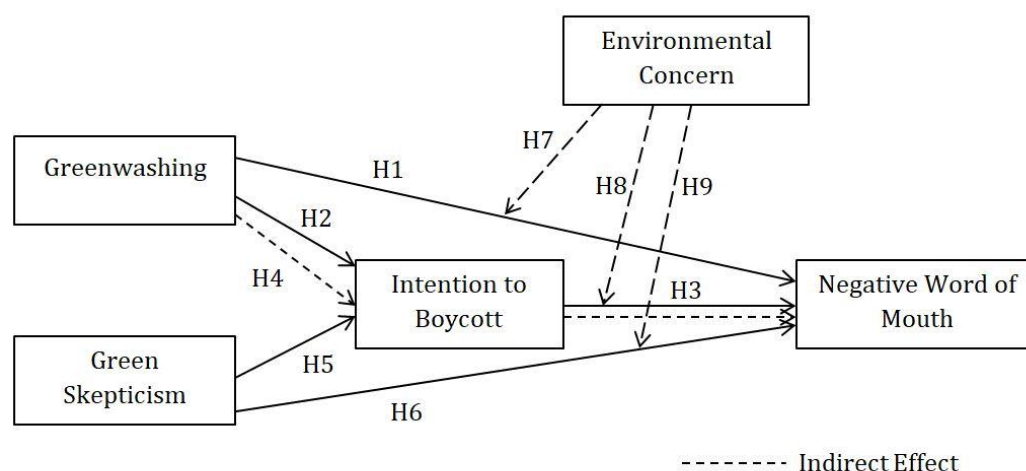


Figure 1. Conceptual framework and hypotheses.

3. METHODOLOGY

On the empirical level, we chose to focus on the fast fashion industry since it is closely related to the concepts of overproduction as well as intensive communication about eco-responsible promises linked to production processes such as the use of recyclable and recycled materials or at the distribution level to minimize carbon footprint by opting for environmentally conscious choices for the transport of goods and in delivery methods. Indeed, the actors in this industry are considered major contributors to environmental degradation and, despite its growth, continue to raise major concerns (Bailey et al., 2022). Furthermore, Tunisian consumers are familiar with brands that have high global recognition such as Zara, Pull & Bear, Bershka, H&M, Stradivarius, Kiabi, Mango, or Okaïdi.

3.1 Data Collection



A first data collection was carried out to test the understanding and clarity of the items used in the questionnaire that was administered and to minimize biases. Then a final version was distributed online via social media and instant messaging to a non-probabilistic sample. We used the snowball method by asking respondents to share the questionnaire with their social circles. A screening question was introduced at the beginning of the questionnaire to ensure respondents' familiarity with the fast-fashion brands that exist in Tunisia and to guarantee the relevance of the data collected. In the end, the questionnaire was completed by 322 respondents. The sample of our research consists of 56.5% women and 39.1% of the respondents are aged between 25 and 40 years, with the majority having a university education level.

3.2 Measurement Scales

To measure the latent variables that constitute our model, we used existing measurement scales. Therefore, we measured greenwashing and negative word-of-mouth using scales employed by Chen et al. (2020) consisting respectively of 5 and 3 items. Environmental skepticism was measured with the scale of Leonidou and Skarmeas (2015) with 4 items. Environmental concern was measured with the scale of Cruz and Manata (2020) with 4 items. As for the intention to boycott, this variable was measured with the scale of Wolter and Cronin (2016) with 3 items. We exclusively used 7-point Likert scales ranging from strongly disagree (1) to strongly agree (7).

3.3 Structural Equation Modeling

For our research, structural equation modeling was used as a statistical technique to measure complex research models and simultaneously analyze a multitude of constructs. This method is considered particularly relevant for social sciences due to its ability to handle variables that cannot be directly measured while considering measurement errors (Hair et al., 2017). Partial Least Squares Structural Equation Modeling (PLS-SEM) was used with the Smart PLS 4 software to assess the hypotheses that were proposed since this technique allows measuring both direct and indirect causal relationships such as moderation, mediation, while being adapted to the particularities of social sciences where normal data distribution is rarely present (Hair et al., 2019). This research uses a two-step analytical approach. The first step measures the measurement model, and the second tests the structural relationships.

4 RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

4.1 Measurement Model Estimation

To estimate the measurement model, several tests were conducted to verify the adequacy of this model. First, convergent validity was measured using the factor loadings (Outer loading). All the items mobilized show a result higher than the threshold of 0.708 recommended by Hulland (1999). Second, the Average Variance Extracted (AVE) exceeds 0.5 for all the variables in the model, indicating that more than half of the observed variance is attributed to these latent variables. To measure the consistency of internal reliability, the composite reliability test as well as Cronbach's alpha were used, and they gave results higher than 0.7 for each variable, exceeding the thresholds recommended by Hair et al. (2019). These results are detailed in **Table 1. (Insert Table 1 here)**

Table1. The results of AVE, Composite Reliability and Cronbach's Alpha values

Variable	AVE	Composite reliability	Cronbach's α
• Intention to Boycott	0.909	0.951	0.950
• Environmental Concern	0.772	0.908	0.901
• Green Skepticism	0.783	0.943	0.910
• Greenwashing	0.789	0.938	0.929
• Negative Word of Mouth	0.912	0.956	0.952

It is also important to evaluate the discriminant validity of the constructs to ensure they are distinct from one another. This was done using the Fornell-Larcker criterion, and the result shows that the square root of the average variance extracted score of each construct in the model is greater than the correlation between this construct and the other variables in the model.

4.2 Evaluation of the Structural Model

In order to evaluate the internal model, the value of the Q2 index was calculated to estimate the overall goodness-of-fit of the model, which also allows estimating the predictive relevance (Kusumawati & Rahayu, 2020). The results of this index for the two endogenous variables of this model are above 0.6, which exceeds the threshold of 0.1 recommended by Hair et al. (2017). R Square was also used to measure the variances of the endogenous variables explained by the exogenous variables of the model. Falk and Miller (1992) consider a value equal to or greater than 0.1 as adequate. For our model, the R Square value for the two endogenous variables is 0.6 and 0.79, which exceeds the required threshold.



4.3 Testing of Hypotheses

To test the hypotheses proposed in our research, we used the Bootstrap of SmartPLS 4, which allows checking direct and indirect relationships by calculating the P-value and T-statistic. Hypotheses H1, H3, H4, H8, and H9 were accepted since the P-value shows results lower than 0.05, and the displayed T-statistic exceeds 1.96, while hypotheses H2, H5, H6, and H7 were rejected. The results of the hypothesis test are detailed in **Table 2. (Insert Table 2 here)**

Table 2. Hypotheses testing results

Hypotheses	Original Sample	Standard Deviation	T-statistics	P-values	Results
(H1) Greenwashing → Intention to Boycott	0.191	0.060	3.180	0.001	Confirmed
(H2) Greenwashing → Negative Word of Mouth	0.112	0.076	1.434	0.152	Rejected
(H3) Intention to Boycott → Negative Word of Mouth	0.365	0.068	5.418	0.000	Confirmed
(H4) Greenwashing → Intention to Boycott → Negative Word of Mouth	0.070	0.027	2.609	0.009	Confirmed
(H5) Green Skepticism → Intention to Boycott	-0.025	0.029	0.817	0.414	Rejected
(H6) Green Skepticism → Negative Word of Mouth	-0.010	0.026	0.349	0.727	Rejected
(H7) Environmental Concern x Greenwashing → Intention to Boycott	0.024	0.020	1.200	0.230	Rejected
(H8) Environmental Concern x Greenwashing → Negative Word of Mouth	-0.470	0.072	6.387	0.000	Confirmed
(H9) Environmental Concern x Intention to Boycott → Negative Word of Mouth	0.297	0.076	3.814	0.000	Confirmed

5. Conclusion and Discussion

This research contributes to the existing literature on greenwashing and its various effects on consumer behavior by testing a series of hypotheses that have shed light on the existing relationships between greenwashing, green skepticism, environmental concern, and the behavioral intentions associated with them. Indeed, the results indicate that greenwashing positively influences the intention to boycott (H1) and also confirms that this intention to boycott influences negative word of mouth (H3). The results show that the intention to boycott plays a complete mediating role between greenwashing and negative word of mouth (H4). This study also shows that environmental concern acts as a moderating variable in the relationship between greenwashing and the intention to boycott (H8), as well as in the link between the intention to boycott and negative word of mouth (H9). These results align with those of Silva et al. (2020) and Nawrotzki (2012), who also emphasize the consequences of greenwashing on consumer trust and brand reputation. On the other hand, the hypothesis regarding the direct effect between greenwashing and the intention to boycott was not validated (H2). This result contrasts with those of Sanchez-Sabate and Sabaté (2019) and Xiao and McCright (2013), who established a direct link between perceived greenwashing and negative consumer reviews. Therefore, we can conclude, based on the result of hypothesis (H4), that the intention to boycott plays a fundamental role in this causal relationship in the form of full mediation, meaning that the willingness to share negative reviews following the perception of greenwashing practices must necessarily go through the intention to boycott. As for green skepticism, this variable does not appear to have an effect on the intention to boycott or negative word of mouth (H5) and (H6). This contrasts with the results of previous studies by Lopes et al. (2023) and Mangini et al. (2020). This may be explained by cultural differences between regions, specifically between Tunisia and Portugal, as Silva (2020) argues that green skepticism is more rooted in cultural attitudes rather than factual knowledge. The absence of a moderating effect of environmental concerns on the relationship between greenwashing and the intention to boycott differs from the results of studies by Delmas and Burbano (2011), indicating that consumers react to greenwashing by ceasing to purchase products from a brand regardless of their level of sensitivity to environmental causes. On the other



hand, the confirmed effects of hypotheses (H8) and (H9) are consistent with the results of Nivetha and Prasanth (2024) and Lyon and Montgomery (2015). This shows that sensitivity to sustainable causes further amplifies the effect of the perception of greenwashing on the intention to boycott and also increases the likelihood of sharing negative word of mouth based on the intention to boycott.

From a managerial perspective, the implications of this research clearly show that companies must recognize that falsely eco-friendly practices and communications eventually turn into harmful behavior towards the brand, pushing consumers towards boycott and sharing negative messages capable of tarnishing the brand's reputation. The results also highlight the importance of transparency and authenticity in companies' eco-friendly actions, which must clarify and rationally explain their responsible actions towards the ecosystem while avoiding any form of ambiguity. Companies should also opt for a green marketing approach by promoting engagement with consumers to enrich positive perceptions and mitigate their skepticism and sense of betrayal. Companies must also be aware of their responsibility by educating consumers and prioritizing transparency through all their environmental approaches. Several actions and partnerships can be beneficial in improving brand credibility, such as partnering with reputable non-governmental organizations known for their serious and honest work in safeguarding the environment.

Some limitations of this research can be highlighted, such as the choice of a non-probability sampling method, which impacts the representativeness relative to the total population and limits the ability to generalize the results. The fact that the study relies on self-assessment may introduce bias, as consumers do not accurately assess their behaviors and attitudes. Future research may also examine the various roles of emotional responses such as disappointment or anger to gain a deeper understanding of the psychological mechanisms associated with greenwashing and its repercussions. The impact of consumer loyalty to a brand may also be integrated into this model to provide a richer view of the different possible interactions. A comparative study of attitudes and behaviors related to different industries, such as the automotive or mobile phone industries, could also be an interesting research avenue.

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Conflict of Interest

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