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The Two Major Types of ‘Greenwash’ definitions, the Problematic Implications of Indistinctness and a Set of Likely Inconsistencies

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Abstract

This paper reviews the various definitions of the ‘greenwash’ concept as it is used in written material by researchers, non-governmental organizations, dictionaries and green marketing professionals. Two major types of definitions are identified: the object attribute view and the process attribute view. Several problematic aspects with how the greenwash concept is often used are identified and discussed. Two issues stand out. First, the indistinctness of what the term actually refers to can be problematic for both firms and environmental activists. Second, some uses of one of the common types of definitions, the process attribute view, are identified as potentially being detrimental to the diffusion and adoption of legitimate green innovations. An implication of importance to firm managers is to be aware of and consider both categories of greenwash definitions before making the decision to market a brand, an innovation or a regular offer as ‘green’.

Keywords: greenwash, green whitewash, green marketing

1 Introduction

Whereas environmental performance has often been focused on regulatory compliance or cost cutting, more and more firms have begun to see the revenue growth potential in creating a green imagery (Esty & Winston, 2006). This stems from increased awareness of environmental issues among of various stakeholders. There is arguably an increased demand from both consumers (World Values Survey V105, 2008) as well as from firms (Keeble et al, 2005) for environmentally friendly products, services and production processes. In short, the benefits of communicating a green message can be significant (Ottman, 1997).

There are many reasons for these potential benefits. For example, in many countries environmental impact has increasingly become an important buying criterion for governments and public procurement. In some businesses, contracts including environmentally oriented after-service offerings have been beneficial to the development of extensive customer relationships in the business-to-business sector (Esty & Winston, 2006). In other cases, an image of environmental competence has led to extensive new partnerships with potential customers (Esty & Winston, 2006). In addition, employee morale and that firms seek a socially responsible image are important reasons for corporate sustainability initiatives (Keeble et al, 2005; Davies, 1960). A green image can be the deciding difference when a consumer is choosing between two otherwise indistinguishable products on a shelf (Ottman, 1997). Thus, there are many benefits to be gained for a firm by marketing its offers and brands as 'green', both for firms directly facing consumers and for business-to-business oriented firms.

However, there are substantial risks involved in marketing an offer as green (Ottman, 1997; Grant, 2009; Esty & Winston, 2006). One of the most pressing of these is the risk of being branded as involved in the activity of 'greenwash', short for green whitewash.

There are several organizations active in spotting and labeling green marketing perceived to be illegitimate as 'greenwashing'. Examples include the environmental activist organization Greenpeace (stopgreenwash.org) and the collaboration between EnviroMedia Marketing and University of Oregon named greenwashingindex.com. Becoming listed by one of these groups as involved in the activity of greenwashing can severely affect the reputation of a company, negating or reversing the effect of the resources spent on green marketing.

Stringent application of the greenwash concept requires a clear definition of the phenomenon denoted by the term. However, judging from keywords searches (ISI web of knowledge, Google scholar) there is still a lack of a dominant definition of the term. It seems fair to say that much usage of the term is vague or even conflicting with other established uses of the term. The purpose of this paper is to 1) provide an overview of the various ways in which the term is defined and 2) argue that some of the ways in which the term greenwash is currently used are problematic and potentially detrimental to the greening of business.

The paper has the following disposition: First I present the method employed for selecting and reading the sources defining the concept. This is followed by the results from the review. In the analysis, I attempt to identify commonalities in the various definitions and suggest two main categories of definitions used. I then proceed to discuss the possible problems and inconsistencies in the application of the term arising from these categories.

2 Method – Selection of Sources and Data Analysis

The reliability of validity of this review is primarily dependent on the methods employed for selection of sources, extraction of definitions from each source and analysis of the

definitions. The only type of uses of the term greenwashing over which I will attempt to generalize is delimited to written uses of the term by one of the following stakeholders: researchers, green marketing professionals, dictionaries and non-governmental organizations/environmental activists.

A sampling frame was created for identifying academic uses of the term, by employing keyword searches using the search engines 1) ISI web of knowledgeⁱ and 2) Google Scholar (2010-03-15). Three keywords were used: 'greenwash', 'greenwashing' and 'green whitewash'. A sample was created by using all results except twoⁱⁱ in the ISI web of knowledge search and the first 20 entriesⁱⁱⁱ from Google Scholar, by selecting those entries that included at least one of the search terms in either title, keywords or abstract, and that were judged to be directly related to the fields of strategic management, marketing, economics, environmental studies or organization theory. For the non-academic categories of sources, the main method for collecting the sample was snowball sampling based on the list of references in the previously identified sources, beginning with the academic sources. This was complemented by a Google search for the three keywords, which resulted in the addition of one additional green marketing professional (TerraChoice), an article describing the history of the term (The Jakarta Post) and two additional dictionary definitions (English Wikipedia and Webster's New Millennium Dictionary of English).

The specific definitions of greenwashing used in each of the various sources were searched for and extracted in the following way: In digital files, an in-text search was made in the full text for each of the three keywords. For printed sources, for example books, I searched the index and the table of contents for the three keywords. For searchable and non-searchable articles, I manually skimmed the text in search for the three keywords.

Any explicit definition was extracted and recorded in a table. In cases where the term was not explicitly defined yet seriously used and discussed, I attempted to make an interpretation based on commonalities in the examples provided in the text. This was judged possible in most, but not all, sources. Each such case is identifiable in table 3 in section 4.

Data analysis consisted of tabulating the various definitions and clustering them according to similarities. These similarities were then labeled and defined, leading to the emergence from the data of two major categories of definitions.

Construct validity is in many senses the most important research quality issue for this paper, but perhaps also the easiest and most transparent because of the many listed and quoted definitions. However, it is of course dependent on the representativeness and interpretations of the sources used. The purpose of the brief review of the history of the term is mainly to give context to the verbatim definitions, thus hopefully enhancing the construct validity of the term.

It is worth noting that mass media is not among the types of sources in the 'population'. Consequently external validity is highly limited in that direction. On the other hand, external validity can nearly be considered a non-issue for the academic sources, as the review probably covers a substantial share of the current entire population (thus implying a limited need for generalization beyond the sample). Similarly, internal validity is not an issue for the review part of the article since no type of cause-effect relationship is claimed. However, in the discussion, a likely impact of certain uses of the greenwashing concept is indeed claimed, based on an analytical inference and coherence with previous theory as in Pfeffer (1982). One can argue that ecological validity partly suffers from the exclusion of mass media's uses of the term, but it is in return strengthened by the

inclusion of the definitions by non-governmental organizations and green marketing professionals.

Finally, for the sake of reliability and replicability, I have attempted to carefully describe a systematic method for the collection and analysis of the 'data' in this section.

3 A Review of How The Greenwashing Term Has Been Used and Defined

This section begins with a brief history of the term greenwashing. The main content of this section is a description by how it is defined by 1) non-governmental organizations, 2) green marketing professionals 3) dictionaries and 4) researchers.

The term greenwashing was allegedly first introduced by New York environmentalist Jay Westerveld in an essay in 1986 (Suryodiningrat, 2008). He had noted that hotels used care for the environment when promoting to customers the reuse of towels instead of having them washed every day. As the reduced washing would obviously reduce the costs of operations for the hotels, he became curious if the hotels had any other similar environmental policies, such as garbage sorting, which would instead add to the costs of operations. As he found that many hotels did not extend their environmental commitment very far beyond the towel recommendation, he coined the term greenwashing.

The term became even more popular in the 90-ies when it was used primarily by environmental activists and non-governmental organizations. One text often cited as trend setting in the popularization of the term is the Greenpeace Book of Greenwash by Bruno and Greer (1992). Although they do not define the term explicitly, the following quote seems to give a good indication of their intended meaning by the term:

“Greenwash, where transnational corporations (TNC) are preserving and expanding their markets by posing as friends of the environment and leaders in the struggle to eradicate poverty” (Bruno and Greer, 1992, p. 1).

The popularity of the term increased further after the turn of the millennium, and might possibly have peaked around the time right after the publication of the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change report on global warming in 2007. For a summarizing graph of the increasing popularity of the term in newspapers, see figure 1. It displays a histogram of the number of occurrences in newspapers between 1986 and 2009:

FIGURE 1

3.1 Environmental activists & Non-governmental Organizations

Today, the term is used in various ways by concurrent environmental activists and non-governmental organizations. On Greenpeace’s website the term is first defined as “Used to describe the act of misleading consumers regarding the environmental practices of a company or the environmental benefits of a product or service.” (stopgreenwash.org, 2010). But the site also lists four criteria or special cases of greenwash, which do not necessarily all overlap with the initial definition. They are: “Dirty Business: Touting an environmental program or product, while the corporation's product or core business is inherently polluting or unsustainable.”; “Ad Bluster: ...if it spends more money advertising an environmental achievement than actually doing it.”; “Political Spin: ...speaking about corporate "green" commitments while lobbying against pending or current environmental laws and regulations.”; “It’s the Law, Stupid: Advertising or

branding a product with environmental achievements that are already required or mandated by existing laws.” (stopgreenwash.org, 2010). The World Summit (2002) defined greenwash based on the notion of destructive firms: Greenwash is the “phenomenon of socially and environmentally destructive corporations attempting to preserve and expand their markets by posing as friends of the environment and leaders in the struggle to eradicate poverty.” (World Summit 2002 in Seele, 2007). The Green life online’s ‘Greenwash 101’ introductory text takes an open approach to the term, initially building on the Oxford English Dictionary’s definition (see below), but also offering the following three criteria or definitions: a) “When companies certify their own sustainability, that’s greenwash.” b) ”When companies spend more on marketing their environmental programs than on funding them, that’s greenwash.” c) “When companies use Earth Day to play host to people they poison, that’s greenwash.”

Adam Werbach, a well-known environmental activist of the Sierra Club, uses the following definition in his Harvard business press book: *Strategy for sustainability – A business manifesto*: “greenwashing: when companies focus more on communicating their green efforts than improving their practices.” (Werbach, 2009, p. 8).

3.2 Green Marketing Professionals

An additional group of actors – the green marketing professionals – offer as number of definitions of greenwashing. Judging from the number of references among the other sources, there are two that seem the most well-known: TerraChoice offers a guide to avoid the seven sins of greenwashing, which together outline a definition of greenwash focused on the product level rather than the firm level (sinsofgreenwashing.org, 2010-03-01). The seven sins are 1) The hidden trade-off – do not focus on benefits in one environmental aspect to hide shortcomings in another; 2) No proof – do not make environmental claims you cannot substantiate; 3) Vagueness – do not simply use terms

such as environmentally-friendly without specification; 4) False labels – do not make up fake eco-labels that endorse your products; 5) Irrelevance – do not market environmental benefits that are standard in your industry; 6) Lesser of two evils – do not try to make your customer feel green about something that in the big picture is not; 7) Fibbing – do not lie about the environmental impact of your products. John Grant defines greenwashing in his 2007 book *The Green Marketing Manifesto* as “making something normal seem greener” (p. 62). However, when later exemplifying the concept he uses the case of British Petroleum’s (BP) advertisement campaign ‘Beyond Petroleum’, arguing that the simplification of the marketing message turned it into a case of too much talk and too little action (p. 84). Although the green marketing consultant and author Jacquelyn Ottman does not offer a definition of the term in her well-known book from 1997, she has since then provided a definition on her online blog: “Greenwashing – communicating (even unintentionally) that one’s product or company is greener than it actually is” (Greenmarketing.com, 2010-05-18).

3.3 Dictionaries

Most dictionary definitions revolve around the misleading disclosure of partial information. For example, the Webster’s New Millennium Dictionary of English (Dictionary.com, 2010) has the following definition of ‘greenwash’: “The practice of promoting environmentally friendly programs to deflect attention from an organization’s unfriendly or less savory activities.” The Oxford dictionary (1999) defines greenwash as “disinformation disseminated by an organization so as to present an environmentally responsible public image.” English Wikipedia currently defines the term as “the practice of companies disingenuously spinning their products and policies as environmentally friendly” (en.wikipedia.org, 2010-03-01).

3.4 Researchers

Turning to academic research, there have been several uses of the term in scientific papers. Powers et al (2009) define greenwashing as when there is a significant difference between the rhetoric of an organization (in their case the World Bank) and action.^{iv} Laufer (2003) builds on rhetoric and communications scholar Sharon Beder (1997) and divides the phenomenon into three categories: confusing, fronting and posturing. Confusing refers to casting doubt on the severity of an identified problem. Fronting refers to funding of and collaboration with environmental interest groups to gain underserved credibility. Posturing refers to the attempt to deceptively convince internal and external stakeholders of the organizations collective commitment to ethics. Strategic management scholars Ramus and Montiel (2005) use the term greenwash to denote a firm's expressed policy of commitment towards environmental care without the simultaneous implementation of the policy. Esty and Winston (2009, p. 248) define the term as "greenwashing is when a firm claims to be doing something green and knows full well it isn't". They also note, however, that the way the term is typically used by NGOs include that firms "make promises before they've taken any action." Mike Reynolds (2004) uses the definition previously mentioned by Greer and Bruno (1992). Hamann and Kapelus (2004, p. 90) define the term as "the projection of a caring image without significant change to socially or environmentally harmful business practices." Kärnä et al (2001, p. 59) defines the term as "Environmental advertising without environmental substance in other operations of the company is 'greenwashing'".

Several researchers do not define the term explicitly, even though they use the term in title, abstract, keywords or repeatedly in the text. Alison Grace Cliath refrains from giving us a proper definition in her paper "Seeing shades: Ecological and Socially Just Labeling" from 2007. The same goes for Luke (2008) in "The politics of true

convenience or inconvenient truth”, Nelson and Robertson in their 2008 paper “Green gold or green wash” and Wood (2003) in “Green revolution or greenwash?”

Although some do not define the term explicitly, they are still verbose enough for us to make an educated guess as to what they might refer to by the term. For example Najam (1999) in “World Business Council for Sustainable Development: The Greening of Business or a Greenwash?” explicitly cites Greenpeace’s and Corpwatch’s definitions. However, the paper refrains from selecting one explicitly, so our only chance to guess at the meaning intended is by judging the conclusions of the paper. For example: “some of what WBCSD does can legitimately be called greenwash. Afterall, it is part of WBCSD’s mandate to put big business’s ‘greenest’ foot forward.” (Najam, 1999, p. 73). Similarly, Lightfoot and Burchell (2004) do not define the term in their paper on “Green hope or greenwash?”. However, they give the following example of what they refer to by the term: “If the EU was unable to operationalize its commitment to sustain-able development and not move beyond rhetoric, then allegations of greenwash can be made” (p. 338). Tom Athanasiou (1996, p. 3) gives us the following clues “The key to greenwashing is manufactured optimism ... anything will do, as long as it can be made to carry the message that, though the world may seem to be going to hell, everything is in good hands.” Finally, post-colonial theorists Munshi and Kurian do not quite define the term in their article with the term in the title (2005), but the following quote allows us to guess at what they might mean by the term (p. 513): A ”communication-driven strategy [...] called ’greenwashing’, [...] allows corporations to manipulate an image of environmental, social, and cultural responsiveness.”

Economists Lyon and Maxwell (2006) define greenwash as the “selective disclosure of positive information about a company’s environmental or social performance, without

full disclosure of negative information on these dimensions.” Kirchoff (2000, p. 403) defines it as “Greenwash (companies lying about their environmental performance)”.

A number of the articles are not published in journals, but rather as working papers or similar. For example: Lyon and Kim (2008, p. 1) define the term as “The practice of promoting environmentally friendly programs to deflect attention from an organization's environmentally unfriendly or less savory activities.” Coplan (2005, p. 2) defines the term as ““Greenwash” is a term used to describe the application of an environmentally friendly sounding name to an environmentally unfriendly practice.”

4 Categories of Greenwashing Definitions

In this section I attempt to summarize the results, that is the various definitions provided above. When comparing the various definitions outlined above, it turns out that many of them are – as reasonably is to be expected – very similar. However, there are some differences that stand out. In particular, in this section I derive categories by clustering the definitions by what phenomenon they focus on. Table 3 below displays the various definitions from the previous chapter in a condensed form as ordered by type of source.

When trying to cluster the various definitions by similarity, two major categories emerged from the data. It turned out that, with a few exceptions, most definitions could be categorized into either 1) definitions focused on the attributes of the object^v as such, or 2) definitions focused on attributes of the process behind the object. I will refer to these categories as the *object attribute view* and the *process attribute view*.

The *object attribute view* is static in the sense that it only considers the attributes of the object in relation to the claims regarding greenness^{vi} at a given time. Greenwash in this view refers to disinformation or outright lying about the environmental performance of the object (i.e. offer or firm). A further sub-categorization is possible by distinguishing

between definitions that seem to view greenness and green claims in a binary way (e.g. either a product is completely sustainable or it isn't), and definitions that focus on the degree of claims in relation to the degree of greenness (e.g. a somewhat green product is greenwashed if the claims are out of proportion). In table 3 the *binary object attribute view* is coded as 'Claiming greenness when not green' and the *relative object attribute view* is coded as 'Exaggerating Green Attributes'. An example of a definition of the *binary object attribute view* is the Oxford Dictionary (1999): "disinformation disseminated by an organization so as to present an environmentally responsible image". An example of a definition of the *relative object attribute view* is Grant (2007, p. 62): "making something normal seem greener."

The *process attribute view* may be viewed as a dynamic perspective, i.e. the phenomenon to be labeled or not as greenwashed is spread out in time. In particular, such definitions tend to take into account the inputs or efforts that have gone into communicating the greenness relative to the efforts that have gone into improving the greenness of the object. Definitions in this category are variations on the theme 'more talk than action'. This is also the code used in table 3 to denote definitions of this type. Greenwashing in this view refers to, at any given time, committing more resources towards communicating greenness than towards achieving it directly by oneself. In contrast to the *object attribute view*, the *process attribute view* focuses on inputs to the process whereas the *object attribute view* focuses on the outputs from the process behind the object (e.g. a new product). An example of a definition of the *process attribute view* is Adam Werbach (2010, p. 8): "greenwashing: when companies focus more on communicating their green efforts than improving their practices."

One way to view these categories is that they describe three different areas in a two-by-two matrix (see table 1 below). The x-axis describes the resolution of the measurements

of ‘greenness’ – i.e. whether the definition views greenness and green claims as a binary matter or a matter of degree. The y-axis describes what is the relevant object of measurement besides green claims – i.e. the approximation used to determine ‘greenness’ in each case. For example: whether the definition focuses on inputs to the process behind the studied object or outcomes of the process, i.e. attributes of the object as such. The empty cell (i.e. the cell in which no of the reviewed definitions fit) would in such a matrix be the binary view of greenness and green claims that is focused on the process inputs rather than the attributes of the object (e.g. the offer) as such.

FIGURE 2 / TABLE 1

It turns out that all dictionary definitions reside in the *object attribute view* category. The same goes for the green marketing professionals, five of the non-governmental organizations/environmental activists’ definitions and eleven of the researchers. In the *process attribute view* category we find seven cases of non-governmental organizations/environmental activists definitions. Noteworthy is the fact that we find Greenpeace in both categories (based on various texts on the frontpage of stopgreenwash.org). This is summarized in table 2 below.

Not all sources could unequivocally be classified into either of the two categories. Consequently some were left uncategorized. In five (academic) cases this was because no explicit definition was given in the source and the examples were not clearly enough aligned to warrant a placement in either category. In three other (academic) cases, definitions were so biased or complex that neither category was able to fully capture the full nature of the definitions. These were: Mushi and Kurian (2005, p. 513) with the best available definition given being “[A] communication-driven strategy [...] called

greenwashing [...] allows corporations to manipulate an image of environmental, social and cultural responsiveness.”; Athanasiou (1996, p. 3), with the best available definition given being “The key to greenwashing is manufactured optimism, which comes in many forms – as images, articles and books, technologies, and even institutions. Anything will do, as long as it can be made to carry the message that, though the world may seem to be going to hell, everything is in good hands.”; Finally, there is Laufer (2003) who defines the concept through the related concepts confusing, fronting and posturing (see section 3.4) and thus uses the term in a slightly broader sense than most other definitions reviewed here.

FIGURE 3 / TABLE 2

To summarize, many of the definitions resemble each other and there is a large overlap in the way the greenwashing concept is used in the various sources. However, clustering by similarity shows that there are two major categories of definitions of the concept. I have chosen to refer to these definitions as the *object attribute view* and the *process attribute view* respectively.

4.1 Summary of the definitions with coding

FIGURE 4 / TABLE 3

5 Discussion

Based on the previous section, we can conclude that what is referred to when denoting an object as greenwashed can typically be categorized into one out of two major categories, although there are exceptions. The two major categories are the *object attribute view*, which focuses on the objective greenness of the object as such, and the *process attribute view*, which focuses on the relative efforts of the process behind the object. The *object attribute view* can in turn be divided into the binary view and the relative view. I will now to proceed to discuss an some of the implications of this finding.

5.1 Problems with two or more different types of definitions

It can certainly be argued that having two or more different definitions of a concept as value laden as greenwashing can be problematic for several stakeholders. An obvious reason is that it creates fertile ground for misunderstandings and confusion as to what is referred to in situations when the concept is used. This confusion can be problematic both as viewed from the perspective of firms as well as other stakeholders interested in holding firms accountable to their environmental claims – in lack of a better word here referred to as ‘green whistleblowers’.

The reason that it can be problematic for firms is that the set of situations in which they risk being accused of greenwashing is larger and more ambiguous if there are two or more potential types of definitions that they must avoid fulfilling. In pragmatic terms, that ambiguity indirectly increases the cost to develop and market green innovations through increased levels of business risk and uncertainty. As a matter of fact, in a recent study (Hordern & Linder, 2009), several interviewed executives expressed serious concern regarding this exact issue when considering the upcoming marketing of their recent, green, incremental product innovations. On a similar theme, the frequently asked

questions part (FAQ) of Green to Gold by Esty and Winston (2009) implies analogous expressed worries from the authors' contacts in commercial firms.

For the green whistleblowers the ambiguousness of the greenwashing concept could potentially be equally problematic. As the word is applied differently in different contexts, it might seem to readers of the word (e.g. the general public) that its application is inconsistent – as it indeed must be if it has varying definitions. This impression might in turn decrease the perceived seriousness of the accusation, depriving the green whistleblowers of much of the potential commercial impact otherwise at their disposal.

Greenpeace is noteworthy because it offers both types of definitions simultaneously on their greenwashing frontpage (stopgreenwash.org, 2010). Using both types of definitions naturally increases the scope of the concept and makes it more difficult for firms trying avoid fulfilling the criteria. (Even more so as the two categories of uses are presented in different parts of the page.)

But if it is problematic for major stakeholders to have various definitions – why have they not all accepted one of the definitions? There are of course many dimensions to any answer to that question, including the struggle for power on each side, perhaps in part played out by attempting to set the agenda by defining key terms. However, there are also specific problems inherent in each category, which might make certain stakeholders hesitant to use definitions of one or the other category for more specific reasons.

5.2 Problems with the object attribute view

The *object attribute view* requires a clear and operational definition of what 'green' is. The economic-environmental system is indeed a very complex system (e.g. Holmberg, 1995). System complexity in turn implies that it is a non-trivial matter to deduce the behavior of the system from the behavior of its individual parts (Simon, 1962). Thus, defining 'greenness' is indeed a delicate matter. Even so, there are a number of criteria and related

methods for making best estimations. A good example of such criteria are the four system conditions of the natural step foundation (Robèrt et al, 2002) and a well-known approach for operationally determining a particular offers' impact is to make a life-cycle assessment (e.g. ISO 14040, 2006). There are two potential drawbacks with this approach: 1) that such assessments are expensive and 2) that greenness is often a matter of degree.

That life-cycle assessments are expensive means that firms may have to invest substantial resources not only into creating something green, but also into the (independent) assessment that what they have created is indeed green. Of course, one might argue that this is a double edged sword – if a green whistleblower suspects that a certain assessment of greenness is not correct it might be very expensive for the green whistleblower to provide better arguments. Who is given the benefit of the doubt in such a situation likely becomes a matter of rhetoric, likely to be determined by the concurrent public moods and opinions in society at large rather than for each individual case.

Because complete environmental sustainability is arguably rather far from the current state of the economic system, green whistleblowers are faced with a dilemma. There may well exist objects that are not environmentally sustainable – and consequently should not be called 'green' in the strictest sense of the word – but that nonetheless are better than the realistic alternatives. This is one reason why 'green' or 'sustainability' has often been referred to as being "a moving target" (e.g. Prabhu and Vanclay, 1997).

Such acceptance of greenness as a relative concept admittedly seems the best solution in terms of logical stringency at the level of analysis performed in this paper. However, it also increases the ambiguity of the concept by being dependent on different stakeholders views of what is 'green enough' in proportion to particular claims of greenness at a

particular time and place. Thus, in many ways it carries the same problems as was discussed above for having multiple non-overlapping definitions.

These problems might be some of the reasons why certain stakeholders prefer the *process attribute view* instead.

5.3 Problems with the process attribute view

It is understandable from reviewing the problems with the *object attribute view* why certain stakeholders would attempt a different type of definition. Unfortunately, the *process attribute view* seems even more problematic than the *object attribute view*.

Recall that the *process attribute view* approximates ‘greenness’ not by the attributes of the object as such, but by the degree of effort invested into the greening of the object. I.e. it clearly favors the investment of resources into development and tangible internal changes in a green direction over the investment of resources into communicating any green attributes of the object. A consequence of such a definition is that the amount of green marketing ‘allowed’ for a particular product innovation is dependent on the difficulty associated with developing the product, or more specifically the environmental performance of the product. This is problematic for several reasons:

First, it mixes up inputs and outputs of the development process. In the real world, there might be many cheap, “quick-fix” innovations that decrease environmental impact more than other innovations which were more expensive to develop.

Second, the amount of environmental impact a certain green product innovation can decrease is in many cases proportional to how many ‘brown’ substitute solutions it replaces among customers. That is, it is dependent on the diffusion and adoption of the product in the market, which in turn depends partly on the efforts spent on green marketing^{vii}. Thus, it is not hard to imagine cases where increased resources towards

green marketing rather than increased resources in green product development may have a larger impact on the reduction of environmental degradation from economic activity. As a consequence, the *process attribute view* allows for the following apparent inconsistency in the application of the greenwashing concept: Increased green marketing of an offer could simultaneously make the offer ‘greenwashed’ *and* be beneficial to the greening of the economy.

The irony of the situation is that greenwashing accusations made from the *process attribute view* might delay the adoption of a product with better environmental performance than any concurrent alternatives. Consequently, green whistleblowers applying the *process attribute view* of greenwash risk to, by their accusations, hamper the economy’s move towards a more sustainable society; exactly the opposite of their proclaimed goals.

6 Conclusion and Managerial Implications

In summary, there are two major categories of greenwash definitions used in the studied sources. These are the *object attribute view* and the *process attribute view*. Both relate the ‘actual greenness’ of the object with the communicated greenness, but differ in how they operationalize the estimation of that ‘actual greenness’. The *object attribute view* focuses on the presumed ‘objective greenness’ of the object in question, for example an offer, in proportion to the proclaimed greenness of the object. The *process attribute view* focuses on the inputs to the process enabling the object, i.e. the investments into environmental performance in proportion to the investments into communication.

A number of potential problems from the perspective of stakeholders working for an increasingly sustainable society have been discussed. One is the fact that the greenwashing concept is ambiguously defined. That is problematic because it makes it more risky for firms to market products that are legitimately green according to one of

the views. It may thus potentially decrease the diffusion of green innovations in the economy. In addition, the ambiguity could potentially lead to decreased impact even of the most warranted accusations if they are perceived as confusing by being inconsistent with previous uses of the term.

Of the two views as discussed by themselves, both are problematic to some extent. However, whereas some of the problems in the *object attribute view* are serious, they do not suffer the same gravity as the main problem with the *process attribute view*. In fact, accusations based on the *process attribute view* are quite likely to sometimes do more harm than good even from the view of the sincere environmental activist.

A manager considering green marketing is wise to be aware of both major views. If he or she considers only one category of definitions, then even the most well-intended of firms could get a nasty surprise in the shape of greenwashing accusations from parties adhering to the other category of definitions.

Endnotes

ⁱ The specific search string used for ISI web of knowledge was: “Topic=(greenwash*) OR Topic=(green whitewash*) AND Document Type=(Article) Refined by: Subject Areas=(ENVIRONMENTAL STUDIES OR BUSINESS OR COMMUNICATION) AND Document Type=(ARTICLE OR PROCEEDINGS PAPER) Timespan=All Years. Databases=SCI-EXPANDED, SSCI, A&HCI, CPCI-S, CPCI-SSH.” Note that

topic refers to the following four fields: Title, Abstract, Author Keywords and Keywords Plus®.

ⁱⁱ One was excluded because its topic was really medicinal rather than about greenwashing (Pezzullo, Resisting "National breast cancer awareness month": The rhetoric of counterpublics and their cultural performances). The other turned out to be problematic to access (Fricke V, Schrader U, 2009; CSR Mainstreaming: Effects and Side-Effects on Sustainable Consumption) and could not in itself affect the conclusions of the paper.

ⁱⁱⁱ One was excluded because it was in the medicinal subject area (Colin Richman, Staffan Castenoso, *The Pharmaceutical Journal*, Vol 280 No 7494 p335-336, 341-342, 22 March 2008: Impact of waste pharmaceuticals: an environmental hazard or “greenwash”?). Besides, that source did not provide any definition of the concept anyway. A second was excluded because of difficulties accessing the source (Greer & Bruno, 1996, *Greenwash: The reality behind corporate environmentalism*). However, a different publication by the same authors in 1992 is indeed part of the sample used.

^{iv} “greenwashing – that is to say the Bank will have modified its environmental rhetoric, but not its actual behavior” (Powers et al, 2009, p. 23)

^v i.e. that which is to be labeled greenwashed or not, typically an offer or firm (brand)

^{vi} Greenness is the adjective that refers to degree of environmental performance—the inverse of the magnitude of environmental impact. A more precise definition of ‘environmental performance’ is provided in the discussion section.

^{vii} This particular argument is of course dependent on that there is a demand for green product performance. Without such, green marketing and greenwashing would be meaningless. The paper’s introduction discusses why this seems to be the case.

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Tables and figures for insertion into the main text

Figure 1:

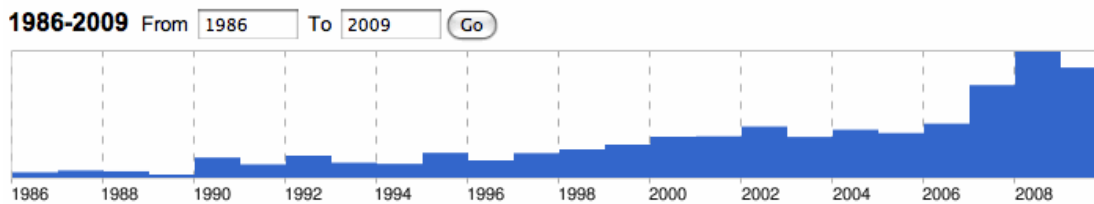


Figure 1. Frequencyⁱⁱⁱ of use of the term 'greenwash' (news.google.com/archivesearch, 2010-04-28)^{vii}

Figure 2 / Table 1

Resolution of measurements /

Binary

Matter of degree

What is measured?

Outputs / object attributes	<i>Binary object attribute view –</i>	<i>Relative object attribute view –</i>
	“Claiming greenness when not green” (36%)	“Exaggerating Green Attributes” (6%)
Inputs / relative effort	<i>Binary process attribute view –</i>	<i>Process attribute view –</i> “More talk than action” (21%)
	“Green claims but no sacrifices” (0%)	

Table 1. Comparison of the categories across two dimensions. 63% of the reviewed definitions are visible by this two-by-two matrix. An additional 25% are between cells in the above graph and would need further context for proper placement. The remaining 12% of the definitions are ‘uncategorized’ and cannot be described by the ideal types making up the axes in the above table.

Figure 3 / Table 2

	<i>Object</i>	Other			Sum
	<i>attribute view</i>	<i>Process attribute view</i>	types of definitions	Undefined	
Dictionaries	3	-	-	N/A	3
NGOs/ Environmen					
tal activists	5	7	-	N/A	11

Green marketing professionals	3	-	-	N/A	3
Researchers	11	-	3	5	20
Sum	22	7	4	4	37

Table 2. Summary of clustering versus source types.

Figure 4 / Table 3

Source	Source type	Definition	Coding
English Wikipedia, 2000	Dictionary	“the practice of companies disingenuously spinning their products and policies as environmentally friendly”	<i>Binary object attribute view</i>
Oxford dictionary, 1999	Dictionary	“disinformation disseminated by an organization so as to present an environmentally responsible public image.”	<i>Binary object attribute view</i>
Webster’s New Millennium Dictionary of English, 2010	Dictionary	“The practice of promoting environmentally friendly programs to deflect attention from an organization’s unfriendly or less savory activities.”	<i>Object attribute view</i>
Grant, 2007	Green marketing professional	"making something normal seem greener"	<i>Relative object attribute view</i>
Ottman, 1997	Green marketing professional	"communicating (even unintentionally) that one’s product or company is greener than it actually is"	<i>Relative object attribute view</i>

TerraChoice, 2010	Green marketing professional	Committing one of the seven sins	<i>Binary object</i> <i>attribute view</i>
Bruno & Greer 1992	NGO/Environmental activist	"Greenwash, where transnational corporations (TNC) are preserving and expanding their markets by posing as friends of the environment and leaders in the struggle to eradicate poverty"	<i>Binary object</i> <i>attribute view</i>
Greenpeace website def/case 1, 2010	NGO/Environmental activist	Touting an environmental program or product, while the corporation's product or core business is inherently polluting or unsustainable.	<i>Object</i> <i>attribute view</i>
Greenpeace website def/case 2, 2010	NGO/Environmental activist	"...speaking about corporate "green" commitments while lobbying against pending or current environmental laws and regulations."	<i>Object</i> <i>attribute view</i>
Greenpeace website def/case 3, 2010	NGO/Environmental activist	"spends more money advertising an environmental achievement than actually doing it."	<i>Process</i> <i>attribute view</i>
Greenpeace website def/case 4, 2010	NGO/Environmental activist	"Advertising or branding a product with environmental achievements that are already required or mandated by existing laws."	<i>Process</i> <i>attribute view</i>
Greenpeace website top definition, 2010	NGO/Environmental activist	"Used to describe the act of misleading consumers regarding the environmental practices of a company or the environmental benefits of a product or service."	<i>Object</i> <i>attribute view</i>

How often used by NGOs according to Esty & Winston 2009	NGO/Environmental activist	"make promises before they've taken any action"	<i>Process</i> <i>attribute view</i>
How often used by NGOs according to Grant 2007	NGO/Environmental activist	Too much communication of a remote vision before having gotten far enough in realizing it (Example given: BP – Beyond Petroleum)	<i>Process</i> <i>attribute view</i>
Westerveld, 1986	NGO/Environmental activist	Example: Hotels claiming eco-orientation to make guests reuse towels	<i>Process</i> <i>attribute view</i>
Thegreenlifeonline.org, 2010	NGO/Environmental activist	Various definitions, incl. "When companies spend more on marketing their environmental programs than on funding them, that's greenwash."	<i>Process</i> <i>attribute view</i>
Werbach, 2009	NGO/Environmental activist	"greenwashing: when companies focus more on communicating their green efforts than improving their practices." the "phenomenon of socially and environmentally destructive	<i>Process</i> <i>attribute view</i>
World Summit, 2002	NGO/Environmental activist	corporations attempting to preserve and expand their markets by posing as friends of the environment and leaders in the struggle to eradicate poverty." "Greenwash" is a term used to describe	<i>Binary object</i> <i>attribute view</i>
Coplan, 2005	Researcher	the application of an environmentally friendly sounding name to an environmentally unfriendly practice	<i>Binary object</i> <i>attribute view</i>

Esty & Winston, 1996	Researcher	"greenwashing is when a firm claims to be doing something green and knows full well it isn't"	<i>Binary object</i> <i>attribute view</i>
Kirchhoff, 2000	Researcher	"Greenwash (companies lying about their environmental performance)" Environmental advertising without environmental substance in other operations of the company is 'greenwashing'	<i>Binary object</i> <i>attribute view</i>
Kärnä et al, 2001	Researcher	The practice of promoting environmentally friendly programs to deflect attention from an organization's environmentally unfriendly or less savory activities.	<i>Binary object</i> <i>attribute view</i>
Lyon & Kim, 2008	Researcher	"selective disclosure of positive information about a company's environmental or social performance, without full disclosure of negative information on these dimensions." a firm's expressed policy of commitment towards environmental care without the simultaneous implementation of the policy	<i>Object</i> <i>attribute view</i>
Lyon & Maxwell, 2006	Researcher	Same as Greer and Bruno	<i>Binary object</i> <i>attribute view</i>
Ramus & Montiel, 2005	Researcher	"the projection of a caring image without significant change to socially or environmentally harmful business practices."	<i>Binary object</i> <i>attribute view</i>
Reynolds, 2004	Researcher		<i>Binary object</i> <i>attribute view</i>
Hamann & Kapelus 2004	Researcher		<i>Object</i> <i>attribute view</i>

Powers et al, 2009	Researcher	difference between the rhetoric and action of an organization	<i>Object</i> <i>attribute view</i>
Lightfoot & Burchell, 2004	Researcher	"If the EU was unable to operationalise its commitment to sustainable development and not move beyond rhetoric, then allegations of greenwash can be made."	<i>Binary object</i> <i>attribute view</i>
Munshi & Kurian, 2005	Researcher	A "communication-driven strategy" ... " called "greenwashing," allows corporations to manipulate an image of environmental, social, and cultural responsiveness.	<i>Uncategorized</i>
Athanasίου, 1996	Researcher	"The key to greenwashing is manufactured optimism ... anything will do, as long as it can be made to carry the message that, though the world may seem to be going to hell, everything is in good hands."	<i>Uncategorized</i>
Laufer, 2003	Researcher	Confusing, fronting and posturing	<i>Uncategorized</i>
Cliath, 2007	Researcher	-	<i>Undefined</i>
Luke, 2008	Researcher	-	<i>Undefined</i>
Najam, 1999	Researcher	somewhat unclear, but e.g. "some of what WBCSD does can legitimately be called greenwash. Afterall, it is part of WBCSD's mandate to put big business's greenest foot forward."	<i>Undefined</i>
Nelson & Robertson, 2008	Researcher	-	<i>Undefined</i>

Wood, 2003

Researcher

-

Undefined

Table 3 – The definitions sorted by source type.