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Sustainability in appearance or in practice? How perceived greenwashing undermines employee performance

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Abstract

The increasing strategic relevance of sustainability has led many organizations to publicly promote their environmental responsibility. However, discrepancies between sustainability communication and actual practices may generate perceptions of greenwashing. While prior research has largely focused on external stakeholders, less is known about the internal consequences of perceived greenwashing. Drawing on organizational behavior and sustainability strategy literature, this study examines whether perceived greenwashing negatively affects employee task performance and organizational citizenship behaviors. Survey data were collected from 154 employees across multiple sectors. Regression analyses reveal that perceived greenwashing is negatively associated with both task performance and discretionary behaviors. Contrary to expectations, personal environmental commitment and green skepticism did not moderate these relationships. The findings suggest that symbolic sustainability strategies may undermine internal performance outcomes, highlighting the importance of strategic authenticity for long-term organizational sustainability.

Keywords: Corporate sustainability, Employee performance, Environmental commitment, Greenwashing, Organizational citizenship behavior, Strategic authenticity, Sustainability strategy.

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1. Introduction

Over the past decades, sustainability has moved from a peripheral concern to a central strategic priority for organizations worldwide. Increasing regulatory pressure, stakeholder expectations, and growing societal awareness regarding climate change have led organizations to publicly position themselves as environmentally responsible actors [1, 2]. However, not all sustainability claims reflect substantive environmental performance. The growing discrepancy between communicated environmental responsibility and actual organizational practices has given rise to the phenomenon of greenwashing.

Greenwashing refers to the selective disclosure, exaggeration, or misrepresentation of environmental practices to create an illusion of sustainability without corresponding substantive action [3, 4]. While this phenomenon has been widely studied from a consumer and investor perspective [5-7] considerably less attention has been devoted to its internal organizational consequences—particularly its impact on employees (e.g., [8]). This omission is theoretically and practically problematic. Employees are not passive observers of corporate sustainability strategies; they are central actors in implementing them Al-Ghazali and Sohail [9]. Emerging evidence suggests that perceived greenwashing is associated with negative internal outcomes, including lower organizational pride, reduced affective commitment, emotional exhaustion, and turn-over intentions (e.g., [10]). However, research examining whether perceived greenwashing directly undermines employee job performance remains limited. This gap is particularly relevant from a sustainability perspective: organizations cannot achieve authentic sustainability if internal performance and engagement are compromised by perceived hypocrisy.

Drawing on organizational behavior and sustainability literature, the present study investigates whether employees' perception of greenwashing negatively affects two critical dimensions of job performance: task performance and organizational citizenship behaviors (OCB). Task performance reflects employees' fulfillment of formal job responsibilities Williams and Anderson [11] whereas OCB captures discretionary behaviors that contribute to organizational effectiveness [12]. Both dimensions are central to sustainable organizational functioning.

Additionally, we explore whether individual differences — specifically personal environmental commitment and green skepticism — strengthen or attenuate the relationship between perceived greenwashing and job performance. Employees with stronger environmental values may experience greater value incongruence when organizational actions contradict sustainability claims. Likewise, employees with higher levels of green skepticism may be more sensitive to perceived inconsistencies.

Using survey data from 154 employees across different sectors, this study contributes to sustainability literature in three ways. First, it extends greenwashing research beyond external stakeholders by empirically examining its consequences for internal organizational performance outcomes. Second, it integrates sustainability and organizational behavior perspectives, demonstrating that symbolic environmental practices may carry tangible behavioral costs within organizations. Third, it contributes to the micro-foundations of sustainability by showing how employees' perceptions shape performance-related outcomes.

By highlighting the internal risks of symbolic sustainability, this study underscores a critical insight: sustainability strategies that remain at the level of appearance may undermine the very human resources required to sustain long-term organizational performance.

2. Literature Review and Hypotheses Development

2.1. Perceived Greenwashing and Employee Performance

Greenwashing has been defined as the discrepancy between communicated environmental responsibility and actual environmental performance [3, 4]. Prior research has predominantly examined its impact on consumers, investors, and external stakeholders, demonstrating negative effects on brand trust, purchase intentions, and corporate reputation [6, 13, 14]. However, considerably less attention has been devoted to employees as internal stakeholders [15].

From an organizational behavior perspective, perceived greenwashing can be understood as a form of organizational inconsistency or hypocrisy, characterized by a misalignment between proclaimed sustainability commitments and actual environmental practices [16, 17]. Organizations that engage in greenwashing practices may be perceived as opportunistic and untrustworthy [18] which can negatively affect employees' evaluations of the organization.

Research indicates that when employees perceive their organization as involved in environmentally irresponsible or hypocritical behaviors, they may experience negative emotions and reduced affective commitment, weakening their emotional attachment to the organization [10]. Moreover, employees are particularly capable of identifying inconsistencies in corporate social responsibility practices, and such perceptions may influence their work-related attitudes and outcomes [15].

Research suggests that perceived organizational inconsistency may shape employees' work-related behaviors. From the perspective of Social Exchange Theory [19] employment relationships are based on reciprocal exchanges in which employees respond to organizational treatment with corresponding attitudes and behaviors. When organizations are perceived as acting ethically and consistently, employees are more likely to reciprocate with positive work behaviors. Conversely, when organizational actions are perceived as deceptive or inconsistent—such as in cases of greenwashing—employees may reduce their behavioral contributions.

In line with prior research indicating that organizational hypocrisy can generate negative employee outcomes [17] and weaken affective bonds [10] perceived greenwashing may in-fluence core dimensions of employee performance.

In this study, perceived performance is conceptualized along two dimensions: perceived task performance and perceived organizational citizenship behaviors (OCB). The first reflects the execution of formally prescribed job duties,

whereas the latter refers to discretionary behaviors that go beyond formal role requirements and contribute to organizational effectiveness [11, 12].

Given that greenwashing represents a discrepancy between communicated sustainability commitments and actual practices [3] employees who perceive such inconsistency may reduce both in-role and extra-role performance. Therefore, the following hypotheses are presented:

H₁: Perceived greenwashing is negatively related to task performance.

H₂: Perceived greenwashing is negatively related to organizational citizenship behaviors.

2.2. The Moderating Role of Personal Environmental Commitment

Personal environmental commitment reflects an individual's sense of responsibility toward environmental protection [20]. Because environmental concern is closely tied to personal values [21] discrepancies between personal environmental values and organizational practices may intensify negative reactions.

From a Person–Organization Fit perspective [22] alignment between individual and organizational values contributes to positive work outcomes, whereas value misalignment can reduce engagement and performance. When employees with strong environmental commitment perceive their organization as engaging in greenwashing, this value incongruence may amplify negative behavioral responses.

Accordingly, we present the following hypotheses:

H₃: Personal environmental commitment strengthens the negative relationship between perceived greenwashing and task performance.

H₄: Personal environmental commitment strengthens the negative relationship between perceived greenwashing and organizational citizenship behaviors.

2.3. The Moderating Role of Green Skepticism

Green skepticism refers to individuals' tendency to doubt environmental claims made by organizations [23]. Employees high in green skepticism are generally more critical of sustainability-related communication and more likely to question the authenticity of corporate environmental initiatives [24].

Drawing on Attribution Theory, skeptical employees are more prone to attribute self-serving motives to organizations when greenwashing is perceived. Such negative attributions may intensify feelings of distrust and relational imbalance. From a Social Exchange Theory [19] perspective, when employees perceive that the organization behaves inconsistently or deceptively, they may reciprocate by reducing work effort and discretionary contributions. Therefore, green skepticism is expected to strengthen the negative effects of perceived greenwashing on task performance and organizational citizenship behaviors. Thus:

H₅: Green skepticism strengthens the negative relationship between perceived greenwashing and task performance.

H₆: Green skepticism strengthens the negative relationship between perceived greenwashing and organizational citizenship behaviors.

3. Research Model

Supported by the literature reviewed above, the present study proposes that individuals who perceive greenwashing practices within their organization will experience a negative impact on their performance. This effect may be stronger among individuals with high levels of personal environmental commitment and among those with higher levels of green skepticism.

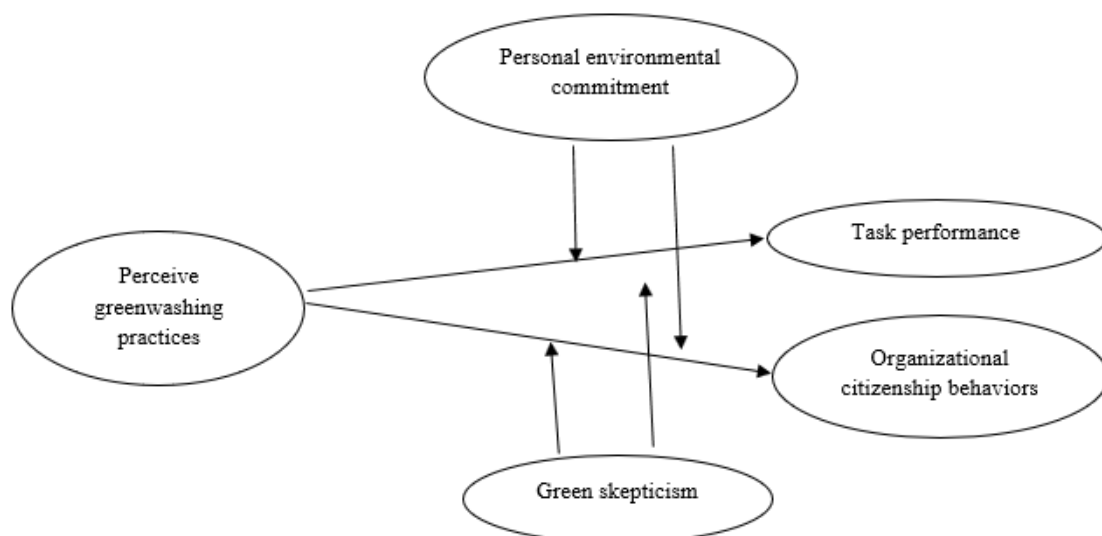


Figure 1.
Research Model.

4. Materials and Methods

4.1. Sample and Procedure

Data was collected through an online survey administered via Qualtrics. Participants were recruited through professional and social networks. The final sample consisted of 154 employees currently working across different sectors. The sample was composed of 67.5% women and 31.2% men. The mean age was 40.57 years (SD = 12.89). Approximately 72% held a university degree. About 35% occupied supervisory roles. Participation was voluntary and anonymous.

4.2. Measures

All constructs were measured using previously validated scales. A translation and back-translation procedure were conducted to ensure linguistic equivalence. All responses were recorded on seven-point Likert-type scales ranging from 1 (“strongly disagree”) to 7 (“strongly agree”).

Perceived greenwashing was measured using the four-item scale developed by Ferrón-Vílchez, et al. [25]. The scale captures employees’ perceptions regarding discrepancies between environmental claims and actual environmental practices within their organization. Higher scores indicate stronger perceptions of greenwashing.

Employee performance was measured using the scale developed by Williams and Anderson [11]. For this study, seven items assessing Task Performance and seven items assessing Organizational Citizenship Behaviors were used.

Personal environmental commitment was measured using the four-item scale developed by Hsu and Roth [20] which assesses individuals’ sense of responsibility toward environmental protection. Higher scores represent stronger environmental commitment.

Green skepticism was measured using four items adapted from Mohr, et al. [23]. The scale captures the degree to which individuals doubt the credibility of environmental claims made by organizations. Higher scores indicate higher levels of skepticism toward environmental communication.

4.3. Data Analysis Strategy

Data were analyzed using IBM SPSS Statistics (Version 28) and the PROCESS macro, model 1. The analysis followed several steps following Hair, et al. [26] recommendations. First, exploratory factor analyses (EFA) were conducted for each scale using maximum likelihood extraction with Varimax rotation. The adequacy of the factor structure was assessed through the Kaiser–Meyer–Olkin (KMO) measure and Bartlett’s test of sphericity. Items with factor loadings below .40 or cross-loadings were removed when necessary. Second, confirmatory factor analyses (CFA) were performed to assess model fit. Model adequacy was evaluated using χ^2/df (<2.5), RMSEA (<0.07), CFI (> 0.9), and TLI (>0.9) indices. Third, internal consistency reliability was assessed using Cronbach’s alpha coefficients (> 0.7). Fourth, Pearson correlation analyses were conducted to examine associations between study variables. Fifth, linear regression analyses were performed to test the direct effects of perceived greenwashing on task performance and organizational citizenship behaviors. Finally, moderation analyses were conducted using the PROCESS macro to test whether personal environmental commitment and green skepticism moderated the relationships between perceived greenwashing and performance outcomes. Statistical significance was set at $p \leq .05$.

5. Results

5.1. Exploratory and Confirmatory Factor Analysis and Reliability

To test the validity of the Perceived Greenwashing scale, an exploratory factor analysis and a confirmatory factor analysis were conducted.

Regarding the exploratory factor analysis, a one-factor structure with four items was obtained. The KMO criterion indicated moderate sampling adequacy (KMO = 0.745), and the assumption of sphericity was rejected in Bartlett’s test ($\chi^2(6) = 151.59$, $p < 0.001$), indicating that the variables were significantly correlated. Thus, a unifactorial structure was identified, accounting for 58.6% of the total variance. Subsequently, a confirmatory factor analysis was conducted using the original structure of the instrument, which revealed a moderate fit ($\chi^2/df = 2.69$; RMSEA = 0.105; CFI = 0.977; TLI = 0.932), with standardized estimates ranging from 0.469 to 0.781.

The same procedure was carried out to evaluate perceived performance. Regarding the exploratory factor analysis, the performance scale was explained by two factors, which accounted for 50.93% of the total variance. The KMO criterion indicated good sampling adequacy (KMO = .832), and Bartlett’s test rejected the assumption of sphericity ($\chi^2(66) = 586.53$, $p < .001$), indicating a significant correlation among the variables. To obtain this structure, two items were removed. The first item was removed because it did not reach the established minimum loading (0.40), and the second item was removed because it loaded simultaneously on two factors. Consequently, two confirmatory factor analyses were conducted: one using the original structure of the scale ($\chi^2/df = 2.02$; RMSEA = 0.081; CFI = 0.885; TLI = 0.863), and the other using the structure revealed by the exploratory factor analysis ($\chi^2/df = 1.55$; RMSEA = 0.059; CFI = 0.964; TLI = 0.933). After estimating the models, it was found that the model resulting from the exploratory factor analysis showed a better fit compared to the original model. The final structure presented standardized estimates ranging from 0.476 to 0.774.

Subsequently, the same analyses were conducted on Personal Environmental Commitment. The results of the exploratory factor analysis revealed a unidimensional structure explained by one factor with four items, accounting for 60.92% of the total variance. The KMO criterion indicated moderate sampling adequacy (KMO = 0.731), and the assumption of sphericity was also rejected ($\chi^2(6) = 177.48$, $p < 0.001$), indicating that the items were significantly correlated with one another. To test the theoretical foundations of the scale, a confirmatory factor analysis was then

conducted. The fit indices of the tested model suggested a poor fit ($\chi^2/df = 5.04$; RMSEA = 0.163; CFI = 0.953; TLI = 0.860).

Finally, regarding Green Skepticism, the KMO criterion indicated moderate sampling adequacy (KMO = .710), and Bartlett's test rejected the assumption of sphericity ($\chi^2(6) = 196.19$, $p < .001$), indicating that the items were significantly correlated with one another. A one-factor structure was identified, accounting for 60.52% of the total explained variance. Similarly, a confirmatory factor analysis was conducted using the structure of the Green Skepticism scale. After estimating the model, it was found that the original scale model showed a moderate fit ($\chi^2/df = 2.95$; RMSEA = 0.112; CFI = 0.980; TLI = 0.940).

The reliability of the scales was assessed through the calculation of Cronbach's al-pa as a measure of internal consistency. This instrument demonstrates acceptable reliability when its alpha values are equal to or greater than 0.70 [27]. The results obtained indicate that all scales showed acceptable levels of internal consistency, ranging from 0.74 to 0.80. The Cronbach's alpha coefficients can be seen in Table 1.

5.2. Descriptive Analysis and Correlations

After analyzing the psychometric properties of the measurement instruments used in this study, the relationships among the study variables were examined in order to verify the existence of the necessary preliminary conditions to proceed with hypothesis testing (Table 1). Both perceived greenwashing and green skepticism showed mean values below the midpoint of the scale, whereas the remaining dimensions under study were rated by participants above the midpoint.

Regarding the associations among dimensions, it was found that perceived greenwashing and green skepticism had a significant moderate positive correlation ($r = 0.28$, $p < 0.01$). The perceived greenwashing variable also showed correlations with other variables, namely task performance, with a significant moderate negative correlation ($r = -0.30$, $p < 0.01$), and organizational citizenship behaviors, with a significant weak negative correlation ($r = -0.20$, $p < 0.01$).

Personal Environmental Commitment and Organizational Citizenship Behaviors showed a significant moderate positive correlation ($r = 0.28$, $p < 0.01$), while Task Performance and Personal Environmental Commitment showed a significant weak positive correlation ($r = 0.17$, $p < 0.05$).

Table 1.
Descriptive Analysis and Correlations.

	Mean	SD	1	2	3	4	5
1.Greenwashing	3.12	1.34	(0.76)				
2. Green Skepticism	3.86	1.26	0.28**	(0.77)			
3. Personal Environmental Commitment	6.10	0.79	-0.02	-0.08	(0.75)		
4. Task Performance	6.25	0.56	-0.30**	-0.11	0.17*	(0.74)	
5. Organizational Citizenship Behaviors	5.99	0.67	-0.20*	0.11	0.28**	-0.08	(0.80)

Note: ** $p < 0.001$; * $p < 0.05$; (Cronbach Alfa).

5.3. Hypothesis Testing

After verifying the associations between the variables, the results of the hypothesis testing are presented. To test H1 and H2, a simple linear regression analysis was conducted. The results revealed that greenwashing has a negative and significant relationship with both task performance ($\beta = -0.287$, $p < 0.001$) and organizational citizenship behaviors ($\beta = -0.203$, $p = 0.011$). Perceived greenwashing practices explain 7.6% ($R^2 = 0.076$) and 3.5% ($R^2 = 0.035$) of the variance in task performance and organizational citizenship behaviors, respectively. Thus, H1 and H2 are supported.

Regarding the moderation hypotheses (H3, H4, H5, and H6), four moderation analyses were conducted to test whether Personal Environmental Commitment and Green Skepticism moderated the relationship between greenwashing and task performance, as well as organizational citizenship behaviors. The results showed no statistically significant moderation effects in any of the tested models.

Concerning the moderation analysis of Personal Environmental Commitment on the relationship between greenwashing and task performance, the effect was not significant, indicating that Personal Environmental Commitment does not moderate this relationship (SE = 0.048; LLCI = -0.121; ULCI = 0.070; $p = 0.603$).

Regarding the moderation analysis of Green Skepticism on the relationship between greenwashing and task performance, the results were also not significant, indicating that Green Skepticism does not moderate this relationship (SE = 0.028; LLCI = -0.058; ULCI = 0.051; $p = 0.896$).

The moderation analysis of Personal Environmental Commitment on the relationship between greenwashing and organizational citizenship behaviors also revealed non-significant results (SE = 0.073; LLCI = -0.135; ULCI = 0.152; $p = 0.908$), indicating that Personal Environmental Commitment does not moderate this relationship. Finally, the moderation analysis of Green Skepticism on the relationship between greenwashing and organizational citizenship behaviors was not significant as well (SE = 0.025; LLCI = -0.027; ULCI = 0.073; $p = 0.371$), indicating that Green Skepticism does not moderate this relationship. Thus, hypotheses H3, H4, H5, and H6 were not supported.

6. Discussion

The present study examined whether perceived greenwashing is associated with employee performance and whether this relationship is moderated by personal environmental commitment and green skepticism. The findings reveal a

significant negative association between perceived greenwashing and both task performance and organizational citizenship behaviors. However, none of the proposed moderation effects reached statistical significance.

These results are consistent with prior research indicating that organizational inconsistency and hypocritical social responsibility practices may generate negative employee outcomes [17]. When employees perceive their organization as engaging in environmentally irresponsible or misleading practices, such perceptions may shape how they evaluate and respond to the organization [10].

In the present study, performance was conceptualized through two dimensions: task performance and organizational citizenship behaviors [11, 12]. The negative associations identified suggest that perceived greenwashing is related not only to employees' execution of formal job responsibilities but also to their discretionary behaviors that contribute to organizational effectiveness. In other words, perceived discrepancies between environmental claims and actual practices appear to be linked to lower levels of both in-role and extra-role performance.

These findings reinforce the importance of coherence between environmental communication and actual organizational practices. As discussed in the literature, greenwashing involves exaggerated or selective disclosure of environmental initiatives [3] which may lead employees to question the organization's sincerity. Given that employees are particularly capable of identifying inconsistencies in corporate environmental communication [15] such perceived discrepancies may be associated with changes in work-related behaviors. Regarding the moderating variables, contrary to expectations, personal environmental commitment and green skepticism did not significantly moderate the relationships examined. Although it was hypothesized that individuals with stronger environmental values [20] or higher levels of skepticism toward environmental claims [23] would react more strongly to perceived greenwashing, the findings did not support these assumptions. This suggests that the negative association between perceived greenwashing and performance may occur regardless of individual differences in environmental commitment or skepticism. A study conducted by Cesário, et al. [28] suggested that certain individual (e.g., gender) and professional characteristics (e.g., managerial position) moderate the relationship between greenwashing and perceptions of sustainability; therefore, these characteristics may also moderate the relationship between greenwashing and performance. Overall, the findings extend the study of greenwashing beyond consumers and external stakeholders by focusing specifically on employees. The results highlight the relevance of examining the internal consequences of perceived greenwashing and indicate that such perceptions are associated with lower levels of both task performance and organizational citizenship behaviors.

6.1. Theoretical and Practical Implications

This study contributes to the literature by examining employees as internal stakeholders, an area that remains comparatively underexplored in greenwashing research [15]. By demonstrating that perceived greenwashing is negatively associated with both task performance and organizational citizenship behaviors, the study provides empirical evidence that internal perceptions of environmental inconsistency are linked to behavioral outcomes within organizations.

From a practical perspective, the findings underline the importance of aligning environmental communication with actual organizational practices. Organizations should ensure that sustainability initiatives are implemented consistently and communicated transparently, as discrepancies between discourse and practice may be associated with lower levels of employee performance.

6.2. Limitations and Future Research

Several limitations should be acknowledged. First, the study employed a cross-sectional design, which does not allow for causal inferences. Future research could adopt longitudinal designs to better examine the directionality of the relationships identified. Second, all variables were measured through self-report instruments, which may increase the risk of common method variance. Third, the sample was relatively small and obtained through non-probabilistic sampling, limiting the generalizability of the findings. Additionally, as the study was conducted in Portugal, the cultural context may influence perceptions of environmental responsibility and ethical behavior [29]. Future research could examine additional moderating variables [28] such as organizational trust and job satisfaction, which may help clarify the conditions under which perceived greenwashing influences employee performance. Furthermore, contextual and individual factors—such as sector of activity and years of professional experience—should be considered in order to provide a more comprehensive understanding of how employees perceive and respond to greenwashing practices across different organizational settings.

7. Conclusion

The present study demonstrates that perceived greenwashing is negatively associated with both employee task performance and organizational citizenship behaviors. These findings highlight the importance of ensuring alignment between environmental communication and actual organizational practices, as perceived discrepancies may be linked to lower levels of in-role and extra-role performance. By focusing on employees as internal stakeholders, this study contributes to the growing body of research examining the internal consequences of perceived greenwashing. It underscores the relevance of consistent and credible environmental practices, suggesting that how sustainability initiatives are perceived within the organization is associated with key behavioral outcomes that support organizational functioning.

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