

Effect of Greenwashing on the Purchase Intentions of Generation Z: The Role of Brand Image, Skepticism, and Brand Pessimism

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Abstract

Objective: Greenwashing refers to the growing prevalence of misleading claims by companies regarding the environmental friendliness of their products or services. This study investigated the impact of greenwashing on the purchasing intentions of Generation Z. **Methodology:** The statistical population for this research comprised all customers of Iran Khodro in Tehran, constituting an unlimited population. A random sample of 384 customers was selected by using Cohen's formula. Data were gathered through a questionnaire encompassing ~~eight~~ 8 dimensions and 30 items. The validity of the questionnaire was assessed through face-content validity and construct validity, while its reliability was confirmed by calculating Cronbach's alpha coefficient and composite reliability. To test the research hypotheses, inferential statistics and the Partial Least

Squares (PLS) technique were utilized. **Findings:** The results indicated that greenwashing negatively impacted brand image, while positively influencing brand skepticism and cynicism. Additionally, brand skepticism correlated positively with brand hate, and brand cynicism contributed to a negative attitude toward the brand. Furthermore, brand image significantly enhanced the purchasing intentions of Generation Z, while brand hate and a negative attitude detracted from this intention. Social influence moderated the relationship between brand hate and the purchasing intentions of Generation Z.

Conclusion: Overall, the findings suggested that greenwashing significantly undermined purchasing intentions among Generation Z by damaging brand image and fostering negative emotions, such as skepticism, cynicism, and hate toward the brand.

Keywords: Brand Distrust, Brand Skepticism, Generation Z, Greenwashing, Purchase Intention.

Introduction

In recent decades, escalating environmental crises, climate change, and increasing social and regulatory pressures have prompted companies to prioritize sustainability and environmental responsibility within their marketing and communication strategies. In this context, green marketing has emerged in response to the rising consumer demand for environmentally responsible corporate behavior. However, with the proliferation of green claims, the issue of greenwashing has also escalated. Greenwashing refers to practices through which companies portray themselves as environmentally responsible without demonstrating real, measurable, and substantiated environmental performance (de Freitas Netto et al., 2020).

The significance of this phenomenon is particularly pronounced when green messages target Generation Z consumers. Growing up in a digital age, this generation has access to vast amounts of information and exhibits high levels of ethical sensitivity and environmental awareness. Generation Z critically assesses the credibility of brand claims and often reacts negatively when inconsistencies arise between corporate rhetoric and actual practices. Such reactions can lead to diminished trust, a tarnished brand image, and a subsequent decline in purchase intention (Balaskas et al., 2025).

Within the automotive industry—often seen as one of the most environmentally detrimental sectors—greenwashing takes on strategic importance, as environmental claims are frequently met with heightened skepticism. While there is a growing body of research on greenwashing, existing studies have not adequately explored how greenwashing influences the purchasing

intentions of Generation Z through interconnected cognitive, emotional, and social mechanisms. Accordingly, this study aims to develop an integrated framework that elucidates the effects of greenwashing on the purchasing intentions of Generation Z within the Iranian automotive industry, emphasizing the roles of brand image, brand skepticism, brand pessimism, negative attitudes toward the brand, brand aversion, and the moderating influence of social factors.

Theoretical Background

Greenwashing is defined as a deceptive communication strategy characterized by a disconnection between marketing messages and actual corporate environmental performance. Systematic reviews reveal that greenwashing manifests in various forms, including vague environmental claims, misleading eco-labels, symbolic use of green imagery, and exaggeration of

minor environmental initiatives (de Freitas Netto et al., 2020). While such practices may create favorable impressions in the short term, their eventual exposure can lead to severe and lasting negative repercussions for consumer perceptions.

One of the most significant consequences of greenwashing is the erosion of brand image. Brand image encompasses consumers' overall perceptions of a brand credibility, responsibility, and ethical orientation. When greenwashing is detected, the positive green brand image deteriorates, transforming into one characterized by distrust and perceived dishonesty. This shift can influence consumer behavior both directly and indirectly (Tu et al., 2024). For Generation Z consumers, who prioritize authenticity and transparency, the negative impact of greenwashing is particularly pronounced (Putra & Darma, 2024).

At the cognitive level, greenwashing fosters brand skepticism. This skepticism arises when consumers question the sincerity and accuracy of brand claims. Empirical evidence indicates that skepticism is often the initial cognitive response to suspicious environmental messaging and can serve as a precursor to deeper, more enduring negative attitudes (Zioło et al., 2024). As skepticism escalates, it may evolve into brand pessimism, reflecting a generalized belief that brands deliberately deceive consumers and prioritize self-interest over genuine environmental and social responsibility (Balaskas et al., 2025).

At the emotional level, cognitive distrust can escalate into intense negative emotions, such as brand aversion. Brand aversion represents one of the most damaging emotional responses consumers can develop, often resulting in purchase avoidance, negative word-of-mouth, and active resistance toward the brand. Recent studies

indicate that brands accused of greenwashing are particularly susceptible to the swift emergence of brand aversion, especially among Generation Z consumers (Zioło et al., 2024).

In addition to these cognitive and emotional mechanisms, social influence plays a crucial role in shaping the responses of Generation Z to greenwashing. This generation is significantly affected by peer opinions, social networks, and digital interactions. Negative perceptions of a brand can spread quickly through social media platforms, amplifying their effect on individual purchase intentions. Consequently, social influence serves as an important moderating factor in the relationship between brand aversion and purchase intention (Balaskas et al., 2025).

Materials & Methods

This study ~~wais~~ applied in nature and utilized~~ds~~ a descriptive survey design conducted cross-sectionally. The statistical population include~~ds~~ all customers of Iran Khodro in Tehran. Due to the absence of an official customer database, the sample size was calculated by using Cochran's formula for an unlimited population, resulting in a sample of 384 respondents selected through convenience sampling.

Data were collected by using an adapted questionnaire comprising ~~eight~~ 8 latent constructs and ~~thirty~~ 30 measurement items, which captured~~d~~ greenwashing, brand image, brand skepticism, brand pessimism, brand aversion, negative brand attitude, social influence, and purchase intention. The validity of the questionnaire was established through face validity, content validity, and construct validity, while reliability was assessed by using Cronbach's alpha and composite reliability indices. Given the non-normal distribution of

the data, hypothesis testing was conducted by using Partial Least Squares Structural Equation Modeling (PLS-SEM) with Smart PLS software.

Research Findings

The empirical results indicateded that greenwashing significantly negatively impacteds brand image while positively influencing brand skepticism and brand pessimism. Furthermore, brand skepticism greatly increaseds brand aversion, and brand pessimism notably intensifieds negative attitudes toward the brand.

The findings also revealed that brand image hadds a significant positive effect on the purchase intentions of Generation Z, whereas brand aversion and negative brand attitudes exerted significant negative effects on purchase intention. One of the key contributions of the study wais the confirmation of the moderating role of social influence in the relationship between brand aversion and

purchase intention. Specifically, higher levels of social influence amplified the adverse impact of brand aversion on the purchase intentions of Generation Z. Model fit indices indicated satisfactory goodness of fit for the proposed conceptual framework.

Discussion of Results & Conclusion

The results demonstrated that greenwashing was not merely an ineffective short-term communication strategy but a detrimental practice that undermined the establishment of sustainable relationships between brands and Generation Z consumers. Greenwashing indirectly diminished purchase intention by damaging brand image and triggering a cascade of negative cognitive and emotional responses, including skepticism, pessimism, and brand aversion.

In the Iranian automotive industry, which contends with inherent environmental challenges, these negative

outcomes might pose long-term threats to brand credibility and organizational performance. Consequently, automotive companies must transcend tokenistic environmental claims and embrace genuine, transparent, and verifiable sustainability practices. Investments in green innovation, implementation of green information systems, and ~~the~~ integration of environmental responsibility throughout the supply chain can help rebuild consumer trust (Mahmoudzadeh & Mahmoudzadeh, 2022). By offering an integrated framework that elucidates the psychological and social mechanisms, by which greenwashing affects consumer behavior, this study enhances the literature on green marketing and consumer behavior, providing valuable insights for managers and future research across various industries and cultural contexts.

Figures & Tables

Fig. 1: Conceptual Research Model

Table 1: Summary of the Empirical Background

**Table 2: Dimensions and Scales Used to Develop the
Research Questionnaire**

Table 3: Skewness and Kurtosis Test Results

**Table 4: Convergent Validity and Composite
Reliability in Measurement Models**

**Fig. 2: Research Structural Model with Standard
Coefficients**

Fig. 3: Structural Model with Significant Coefficients

Table 5: Results from Structural Model Evaluation