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THE PHENOMENON OF “GREENWASHING” IN EUROPEAN BUSINESS SCHOOLS:
AN EXPLORATORY STUDY OF STUDENTS' PERCEPTIONS

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Abstract

How do students perceive “greenwashing” attitudes in European business schools? With the current increasing expectations for business schools to foster and teach sustainability, this question is a fundamental one. Surprisingly, however, empirical research on this topic is scant – most of the contemporary literature focuses instead on greenwashing attitudes among firms. The goal of this dissertation is to initiate a scientific inquiry on the topic of greenwashing in the educational context. To this end, a theory explaining how students perceive greenwashing in European business schools is developed by utilizing a qualitative research methodology.

Keywords: Greenwashing attitudes; Business Schools; Students; fostering sustainability.

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1. Introduction

In light of the current environmental and social challenges that exist across societies worldwide, the ultimate purpose of business organizations has been redefined from serving shareholders to creating value for stakeholders. This is witnessed by the recent update of the ‘Statement on the Purpose of a Corporation’ at the Business Roundtable (Business Roundtable 2019). Companies are recognizing that their long-term success depends not only on maximizing profits and shareholders’ satisfaction but also on doing business according to social and environmental norms in a way that leads to creating shared value (Porter and Kramer 2011). Nonetheless, social and environmental commitments are not expected exclusively from the business world. To effectively remedy the world’s most urgent problems and achieve large-scale social impact, a purpose redefinition should occur among those actors whose role is also fundamental to generate societal progress. According to Wang et al. (2013), “an ecologically sound society requires strong support from higher education institutions”. Universities can indeed be platforms for changing culture (Nauman 2020). By their very nature, business schools are institutions that educate and shape the minds of the future class of managers (Smith and Rönnegard 2016). As such, they may play a significant role in eradicating the belief that financial success and societal progress cannot be achieved simultaneously. Instead, future managers should be taught to perceive companies as “societal change agents” (Kramer & Pfitzer 2016). Nonetheless, although sustainability and ethics are being recognized as solutions for the long-term success of a firm, many companies still reason in a short-term perspective or even leverage this current trend of environmental consciousness to claim to be engaging in sustainability while their actual environmental performance does not reflect this change of behavior. This phenomenon - misleading consumers about a company’s environmental performance (or the environmental benefits of a product or service) - is known as “greenwashing” (Delmas and Burbano 2011). Considering the current pressure for higher

education institutions to confront the climate emergency (Nauman 2020), one can infer that some form of greenwashing might exist even among universities and business schools in particular. Although previous researchers have put forth various explanations for firm-related greenwashing, the topic is fundamentally unexplored in the context of higher education institutions. The lack of research does not necessarily imply that it is absent or that universities' stakeholders do not perceive it. Thus, this work aims to fill this literature gap by expanding the knowledge in the field of greenwashing in the educational context. More specifically, the purpose of this inductive research is to investigate students' perceptions of greenwashing attitudes of their business schools. This is done by answering the following research question:

How do students perceive the phenomenon of greenwashing in European business schools?

The research question is answered by conducting a qualitative grounded theory research based on the Gioia methodology (Gioia, Corley, and Hamilton 2013). The model that this study seeks to develop attempts to determine if perceptions of greenwashing might induce some type of students' skepticism towards the real intentions and motives of business schools' environmental claims (Forehand and Grier 2003; Obermiller and Spangenberg 1998). Furthermore, it also attempts to determine if Argyris and Schön's theory of action can explain the inconsistencies perceived by students regarding their business schools' behavior (Argyris and Schön 1974).

Guided by the research question, the rest of this paper is structured as follows: section 2 provides an overview of the theoretical background of greenwashing, the role of higher education in fostering sustainability, and the theories that will be adopted to support the final model. Section 3 explains the method used to explore the research question, followed by the analysis of the data in section 4. In section 5, the final model is discussed together with its limitations. Directions for future research are also provided. Finally, conclusions are drawn in section 6.

2. Literature Review

To date, the literature has predominantly concentrated on greenwashing attitudes undertaken by corporations, with considerably less attention given to other important actors, such as higher education institutions and business schools. Thus, this chapter will provide an overview of the current knowledge available in the field of greenwashing, of the role that higher education institutions can play in fostering sustainability, and finally, of the theories that will attempt to explain the model this research seeks to develop.

2.1 The concept of Greenwashing

The term “greenwashing” was first introduced in the late 1980s in a context in which transnational corporations could no longer deny their role in environmental degradation due to the sheer weight of evidence of their operations’ harmful ecological and social impacts. Given the impossibility to further remain in what Zadek (2004) would define a defensive stage of the organizational learning, many organizations started to “embrace” the environment as their cause and to pose themselves as leaders in the struggle to eradicate ecological issues, when, in reality, little behavioral change was occurring (Greer and Bruno 1996).

To date, research relative to the phenomenon of greenwashing is mainly confined to the organizational context. Different researchers have studied and defined this phenomenon attempting to identify its main drivers and its consequences. However, the focus has been primarily on the world of businesses. Lyon & Maxwell (2011) define greenwashing as a company’s selective disclosure of positive information without full disclosure of negative information in such a way that generates an overly positive organizational image. Similarly, Delmas and Burbano (2011) investigate the external, organizational, and individual greenwashing drivers and describe this phenomenon as the intersection of two simultaneous firms’ behaviors: poor environmental performance and positive communication about environmental performance.

Furthermore, while Nyilasy et al. (2014) focus on the negative consequences of greenwashing on brand attitudes and purchase intention, Parguel et al. (2011) propose the introduction of sustainability ratings to deter greenwashing attitudes. Many researchers argue that it is the lack of rigorous reporting methods and assessment of corporate compliance effectiveness to explain the increasing phenomenon of greenwashing among firms (Delmas and Burbano 2011; Laufer 2003; Ramus and Montiel 2005). As Laufer (2003) suggests, “It is impossible to judge how significant the disconnection is between public statements of compliance or social responsibility, and a firm’s genuine efforts particularly without external, third-party verification and monitoring”.

In sum, even a cursory look at the greenwashing literature leads to the conclusion that research on this phenomenon remains limited to the organizational context. It seems indeed that no previous author has attempted to investigate greenwashing attitudes undertaken by other actors, such as higher education institutions. Surprisingly, what is missing in the literature is a systematic analysis of the circumstances under which students, the main stakeholders of higher education institutions, perceive this phenomenon in their universities. Thus, this inductive research aims to fill this literature gap while generating new knowledge about greenwashing attitudes in the educational context and, more specifically, in European business schools. The starting point of this investigation requires the definition of a “greenwashing business school”. In this sense, the definition that Delmas and Burbano (2011) propose to describe a firm engaging in greenwashing will be adopted and assumed to be a valid definition also for the case of a business school. These authors consider the combination of two dimensions to identify greenwashing attitudes: environmental performance and communication about environmental performance. Accordingly, it is possible to distinguish four different types of business schools. A business school would be described as “vocal” when it communicates about its environmental performance or “silent” in the opposite case. On the other hand, a business school can either

have low or positive environmental performances. Delmas and Burbano (2011) would define the former as “brown” and the latter as “green”. Thus, a “vocal green business school” would be one characterized by positive environmental performance and active communication, while a “silent green business school” would be one with an undisclosed (or poorly communicated) positive environmental performance. Business schools with poor environmental performance (“brown”) may decide to either provide no communication about it (i.e., being a “silent brown business school”) or attempt to represent their poor environmental performance using a positive spin (i.e., being a “greenwashing business school”). Thus, a fundamental assumption for the definition of greenwashing to apply is to provide positive (i.e., misleading) communication about poor environmental performance. A visual representation of how to identify the types of business schools mentioned above can be found in Appendix 1.

2.2 The role of higher education institutions and business schools

The underpinning role of education in fostering environmental protection and conservation was formally recognized at the 1972 Conference of Stockholm (UNEP 1972). Since then, many academic declarations, partnerships, and initiatives, such as the United Nations Decade of Education for Sustainable Development, have reiterated this fundamental role of higher education institutions (Unesco 2005; Lozano et al. 2013). Consequently, these very institutions have drawn the attention of many researchers and authors who have mainly investigated the role that they effectively play in fostering sustainable development. Wang et al. (2013) argue that “an ecologically sound society requires strong support from higher education institutions”. Similarly, Smith and Rönnegard (2016) perceive business schools as “potential avenues for change”. It seems indeed that young individuals, and especially those who will occupy high offices later in their career, are the main drivers for a more sustainable future (Green 2013). This leads to the understanding that it is of utmost importance to effectively educate students with the necessary knowledge and skills to shift towards an ecologically resilient society.

According to Wang et al. (2013), this is done by “educator’s transforming their course and curricula so as to engage and empower students to learn and apply new sustainable development-oriented concepts, paradigms knowledge, and wisdom”. Dagiliute and Liobikiene (2015) believe that higher education institutions have the potential to shape the mind of the future managerial class. In this regard, universities may contribute to environmental awareness and ethical behavior by greening their campuses and promoting internal and external policies and activities.

Nonetheless, despite recognizing the fundamental role that higher education institutions play in building a sustainable and ecologically-sound society, some authors claim that many universities and business schools are still “stuck in an old, misguided, and dysfunctional mindset that shapes mindsets and guides actions” (Waddock 2020). Many argue that business schools still deliver knowledge based on some dominant economic and management theories that have created significant social disparities and ecological issues. For example, they still promote the idea that the only social responsibility of a business is to increase its profit, in line with Milton Friedman’s shareholder theory of the firm (Friedman 1970; Waddock 2020). According to Waddock (2020), Friedman’s shareholder theory of the firm ignores the environmental impact of economic activity and argues for the continual growth of financial wealth. These ideas profoundly mold what is taught in business schools at present, unavoidably influencing how business leaders and managers, who mostly come through business schools, shape their companies. Accordingly, Ghoshal (2005, p. 75) argues that “Many of the worst excesses of recent management practices have their roots in a set of ideas that have emerged from business school academics over the last 30 years.” Precisely because the values taught in business schools influence the way managers run businesses, misconceptions about the purpose of corporations should be addressed by these very institutions (Smith and Rönnegard 2016).

Thus, previous literature envisions business schools as crucial actors in the transition towards a more sustainable world. (Lozano et al. 2013; Dagiliute and Liobikiene 2015; Beynaghi et al. 2016; Wang et al. 2013). In keeping with this, many higher education institutions have recognized the importance of their role and shift their focus towards energy and climate change issues, as documented by the study conducted by Suwartha and Sari (2013). Additionally, many universities have become signatories of declarations, charters, and initiatives showing their commitment to environmental causes. Nevertheless, one can suppose that alongside universities that portray themselves as engaging in sustainable practices, there could be a few whose actual environmental consciousness and sustainable commitments are, in reality, inconsistent or even inexistent. Lozano and Young (2013) indeed argue that the commitment made by those universities that have signed declarations, charters, and initiatives has rarely been followed by actual implementation. After all, given the increasing pressures and expectations for universities to foster sustainability, it is plausible to wonder if some of these institutions might rather profit from climate change to portray themselves as environmental leaders without truly “walking the talk”. It would be an important contribution to the existing literature to investigate if the phenomenon of “greenwashing” is present not only among corporations but also in the world of higher education. Surprisingly, there is almost no empirical research related to the phenomenon of greenwashing in business schools or even universities in general – most of the contemporary literature is indeed purely focused on firms’ greenwashing. Therefore, the present study aims to investigate students’ perceptions of greenwashing attitudes in the educational world.

2.3 Theories seeking to explicate the final model

In order to better understand the phenomenon by which students might perceive greenwashing attitudes in their business schools, it is necessary to take into account the mechanism that underlies the processing of simultaneous positive communication about environmental

commitment and actual environmental performance. Following Delmas and Burbano's (2011) proposed definition, greenwashing occurs when two behaviors are observed: poor environmental performance and positive communication about environmental performance. In this sense, developing a model that explicates students' perceptions of greenwashing attitudes in European business schools might help understand whether Chris Argyris and Donald Schön's theory of action may apply to the case of higher education institutions, in particular when it comes to adopting sustainable practices.

Argyris and Schön's theory of action focuses mainly on human' behavior rather than the behavior adopted by abstract entities such as universities. The authors identify a discrepancy between what drives people's actions at the conscious and unconscious levels. The theory argues that most people are unaware that the consciously espoused reasons for their behavior might deviate substantially from what drives their behavior at a more profound and unconscious level. In other words, Argyris and Schon claim that the values individuals espouse (the "espoused theories"), are inconsistent with the values that drive their very behavior (the "theories-in-use") (Argyris and Schön 1974). This research will try to understand if students perceive any inconsistency between the values espoused by their business schools and the values that drive their behaviors. This can be interpreted as an application of Argyris and Schön's theory of action to the educational context, especially in higher education institutions that are expected to foster sustainable and environmentally conscious ideologies.

Moreover, this study also seeks to investigate if students' perceptions of business schools' greenwashing attitudes might induce a sense of skepticism towards those that are the real motives and purposes of business school's claims regarding their sustainable values and attitudes. The researcher also wishes to understand if greenwashing perceptions of the student's business school might lead to any dispositional skepticism towards other business schools' ecological attitudes. Thus, this research attempts to understand if – by extension- students end

up distrusting the reliability of other business schools' declarations and aims since they perceive greenwashing attitudes in their schools. Previous research in the field of consumers' skepticism has conceptualized this phenomenon as a trait that predisposes individuals to question the authenticity of different forms of marketing communication (Forehand and Grier 2003; Obermiller and Spangenberg 1998). Consumers are likely to perceive that firms have hidden motives, such as profit or image, and might be more suspicious of firms that solely profess purely public-serving purposes. In a study conducted by Forehand and Grier (2003), consumers' responses to corporate societal marketing engagement have been measured. Results have revealed that skepticism arises in light of the perceptions that corporate societal marketing is driven not only by beliefs that the organization might benefit but also by the impression that the organization is being deceptive about the real benefits it receives from these types of communications. This leads to wonder if perceptions that a business school's stated motives are in conflicts with its practical behavior would instill in students the beliefs that business schools are instead driven by school-serving aims and hence induce a sense of skepticism towards the true motives of business schools' environmental claims.

3. Methodology

The outlined research question "*How do students perceive the phenomenon of greenwashing in European business schools?*" is answered by conducting a qualitative grounded theory research based on the Gioia methodology (Gioia et al. 2013). Data gathered from students' interviews is coded to identify students' perceptions of greenwashing attitudes in higher education institutions. Given the lack of prior extant knowledge, this method suits the purpose of the research because interviews bring novel insights about greenwashing attitudes in the world of higher education. In the following section, the methodology will be further explained. Afterward, the questions, the intentions, and the structure of the interview will be presented.

Finally, in the last section, a description of the criteria used to analyze data for this work project will be provided.

3.1 Research approach

Due to the lack of previous research related to the phenomenon of greenwashing in business schools, adopting an inductive grounded theory approach based on the Gioia methodology (Gioia, Corley, and Hamilton 2013) appeared to be the most appropriate way to generate a persuasive new theory and, hence, to understand the process by which students perceive the phenomenon of greenwashing in European business schools. Thus, qualitative data were systematically gathered in a series of semi-structured interviews carried out via video calls during a one-month period in November 2020. As the study explicitly focuses on one specific group of business schools' stakeholders, students, only individuals belonging to this category have been contacted to be interviewed. They were recruited on the basis of internet research and personal contacts. More specifically, 43 students from different European Business Schools have been invited to participate in this research, and 27 agreed to be interviewed (a 63% response rate). However, 7 interviews were eventually dropped from the data analysis because students reported that they ignored or were uncertain about their business schools' communication strategy regarding sustainability-related values, which made it impossible to identify whether greenwashing (i.e., a mismatch between the actual environmental performance and the positive communication about the environmental performance of the institution, Delmas and Burbano 2011) was actually present. Thus, the final sample was composed of 20 scholars from 11 European business schools. The choice of a 20-student sample as minimum number to articulate the model is based on the idea that the theory needs to be well detailed and saturated (Creswell et al. 2007).

Additionally, the decision not to disclose these 11 business schools' names was taken as the purpose of this study is merely focused on students' perceptions of greenwashing attitudes rather

than identifying the business schools engaging in the phenomenon at hand. In this regard, any time the name of a business school emerges in a quote reported in the findings section, it is replaced with an alphabetical letter. All interviews were audio-recorded and transcribed with the permission of the participants. Participants of the interviews were ensured that their responses would be treated anonymously, such that their identity would not be disclosed in any published research. A copy of the authorization form signed by participants can be found in Appendix 2.

3.2 Interview structure

Interviews were semi-structured, with the use of open questions followed by questions to encourage further disclosure or to probe for clarification. Typically interviews lasted approximately 20 minutes. They were fully transcribed, with transcriptions ranging from 1000 to 3000 words long. Transcripts resulted in 52 single-spaced pages. The interview protocol was designed with extraordinary attention by focusing on the research question. The same structure was used for all interviews. However, the questionnaire does not suggest a strict procedure but presents a flexible guideline, which allowed the interviewer to react to the given answers and left room for interposed questions. The questions were constructed in English. However, 6 interviews were conducted in Italian, the language spoken by both the researcher and those specific 6 students. In line with Gioia's methodology, the interview protocol was designed without any reference to existing theory or terminology to avoid students' bias towards the writer's preordained understanding of the topic (Gioia, Corley, and Hamilton 2013). That is, the term "greenwashing" was never introduced to students during the interview. Other expressions such as "inconsistencies" or "tensions" were instead used to ask questions about business schools' behaviors and practices. In this way, it was possible to fully grasp students' experiences, opinions, and points of view. The interview protocol was structured into three different parts. The first part focuses on students' perception of the role of business schools in

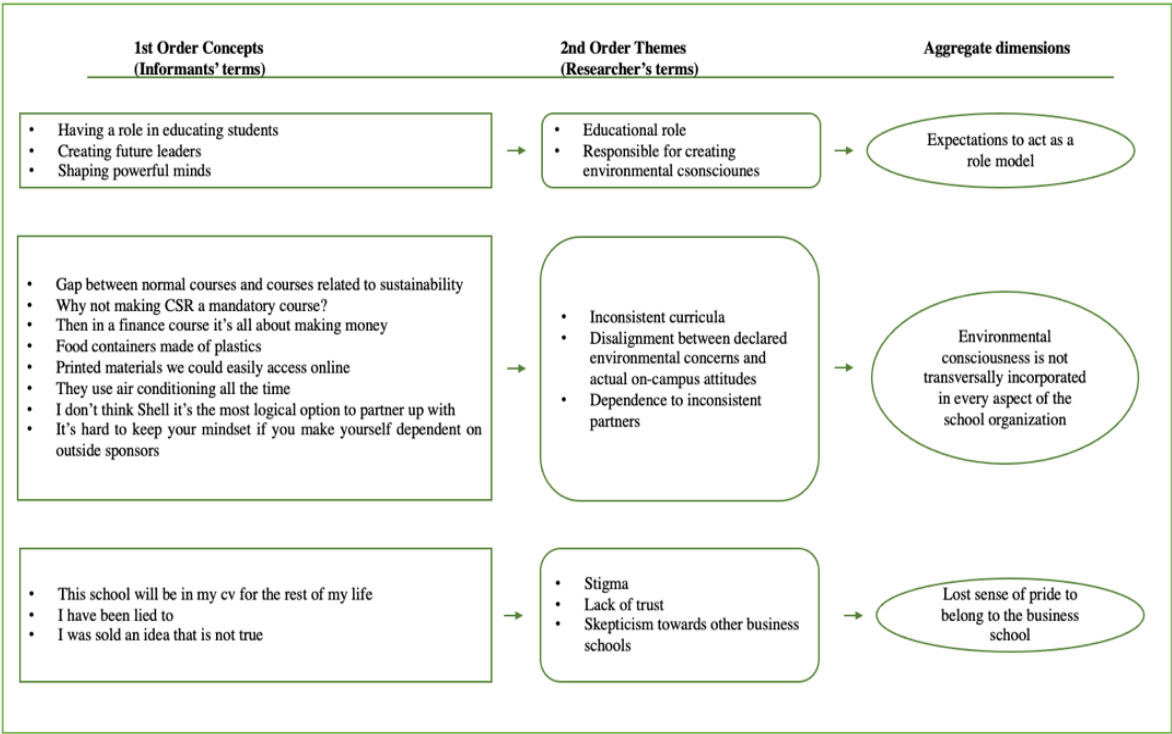
the current society. The goal was to get a first assessment of how the interviewee considers business schools and their role in building a more sustainable society—these questions aimed for the students’ subjective, personal opinions. The second part includes questions regarding eventual environmental tensions or inconsistencies perceived by the students in their business schools. The goal was to investigate how the interviewee perceives any greenwashing attitude in his or her higher education institution. Finally, the last questions aimed at understanding how students respond to perceived greenwashing attitudes. A copy of the interview protocol can be found in Appendix 3.

3.3 Criteria of analysis

As the goal of this study was to articulate an inductive model that, derived from participants’ data, captured the informants’ experience in theoretical terms, extreme attention was given to the terms used by students when answering the questions. The interviewing and data analysis were carried out simultaneously. However, the latter was divided into two phases: a 1st-order analysis was conducted to faithfully adhere to the students’ terms, while a 2nd-order analysis was successively conducted to “translate” informants’ terms and statements into theoretical concepts and codes. The analysis of data started by following Strauss and Corbin’s (1998) notion of open coding. This implies reading the interviews several times to identify initial concepts in the data and then cluster them into different categories. As a matter of fact, by adhering faithfully to informants’ terms, a myriad of students’ terms and codes emerged early in the research. Afterward, these were aggregated into a more concise number of categories (axial coding) thanks to identifying patterns in the data. After the axial coding, the selective coding allowed identifying the relationship between categories and the subsequent development of a model that explains how the phenomenon of greenwashing is perceived in the educational context (Corley and Gioia 2004). Additionally, a data structure was articulated to provide a

graphical representation of the progression from raw data to broader themes and concepts while conducting the analyses. This can be found in Figure I.

Figure I. Graphic representation of the progression from raw data to broader themes and concepts (Modified version from Corley and Gioia 2004)



4. Findings

4.1 The expectation for business schools to act as role models

The first insightful theme that emerged from the first set of questions is the general deep-rooted expectation for business schools to act as ethical educational agents. As such, they have the responsibility to educate students about sustainability and create environmental consciousness. As a matter of fact, to the question “Do you think that business schools play a role in fostering sustainability?” every interviewee answered by underlying the paramount role of business schools in shaping the minds of the students. Student 1 affirmed, “My idea is that business schools have a role in forming people and educating them. If they do not educate students on

sustainability, students are not going to consider sustainability important”. Similarly, student 6 declared, “If we think that people who are in business schools might have a very huge impact on society someday, the role of business schools is really to mold future people who will be taking the lead”. Respondent 9 argued, “I think everyone has a role in fostering sustainability. But I think business schools have a special role in doing that because they are possibly creating future leaders. They should shape the minds of the students to be more sustainable and for them not to care only about profits”. Student 14 argued instead, “I think the bases of change always come from education. If you want to change society, you need to change it through education and from an early age. Business schools have the power to introduce these values into the mind of future leaders”. Finally, interviewee 19 said, “I think sustainability is essential and business schools have the role of planting a seed in every students’ mind, to create sustainable leaders for the future”.

4.2 Students’ perceptions of greenwashing attitudes

For what concerns the second set of questions, it was possible to understand that there are different ways through which students perceive greenwashing attitudes in business schools. In this sense, three main themes emerged. To the question, “Do you feel any inconsistency or tension between the sustainable mindset your business school claims to have and its true behavior?” 17 students responded that they perceive some tension. On the other hand, 3 students declared they do not feel any inconsistency, which of course, is also plausible and, in line with the definition adopted from Delma and Burbano (2011), it would represent the case of a “green vocal business school”.

Thanks to the question mentioned above, the first theme identified is the mismatch between business schools communicated sustainable culture and the concepts and values delivered and taught throughout the curricula. Student 2 indeed replied, “My business school tries to pass the message that being environmentally conscious is important, but then this message is not

reflected in the way they deliver courses. I think it is important to have specific courses on the topic of sustainability, but in my opinion, this is not enough because then you have courses that are basically separated from the others, and then you have a kind of gap between the “normal” courses and the courses that focus on sustainability. Sustainability should be incorporated in every course to create uniformity and make it a usual thing to talk about”. On the other hand, student 5 affirmed, “I think the whole package of courses could be improved in a way that professors know what the others are teaching so that there is a coherent message that they are delivering to students. Because you cannot then go to a finance course and it’s all about making money, money, and money. There should also be a part about sustainability”.

The second theme arising from interviewees’ answers is the inconsistency between the business schools’ portrayed environmental consciousness and the actual attitudes and practices on campus. Terms like “paper waste”, “plastic usage” and “energy consumption” were recurrently employed by several students. Student 12 stated, “I can see some inconsistency in the way they use paper. It does not seem that they really care about it”. Interviewee 15 stated, “I remember reading in the university’s newsletter that we will have a gas station on campus. Why don’t they install chargers for electric cars instead? I don’t understand the point of having a gas station on campus. This is completely against the image they want to pass regarding being a sustainable school”. Respondent 17 declared, “A claims to be working towards sustainability, but then I walk into class and my teacher gives each of us a 20-page printed exercise as a copy of a textbook that we could easily access it online”. Student 18 replied “They strive for having a green campus, but at the same time their food containers are made of plastics, there are paper towels in the bathroom when we could have hand-dryers [...] they use air conditioning all the time and lights are turned on all the time. This really shocks me”.

Lastly, the third theme related to how students perceive greenwashing attitudes in their business schools has to do with those partnerships established with companies whose values are

inconsistent with the business school's sustainable mindset and culture. Interviewee 3 indeed replied, "I think that if you make yourself so dependent on outside sponsors like big companies that do not share these values, then it's very hard to keep your mindset in terms of sustainability". Student 8 affirmed, "They have this whole mission and vision of working towards a greener future, but they also have a partnership with Shell. I don't think this is the most logical option to partner up with". While respondent 10 said, "Well, I can see they have partnerships with companies that are very well-known for not being environmentally sustainable. They even promote them on campus with presentations or during the career fairs".

4.3 Perceptions of greenwashing trigger students' skepticism

An emblematic aspect of the survey is that when students were asked why their business schools would engage in such attitudes, not even one of the seventeen students who perceived inconsistencies in his (or her) business school's behavior seemed to believe in the bonafide of the institution. Put simply, no one seemed to assume that the identified inconsistencies could be related to accidental and unintended mistakes made while attempting to behave sustainably. Every student interpreted the perceived mismatches as evidence that the institution's alleged environmental consciousness aimed at reaching other purposes. Thus, the respondents' answers revealed that greenwashing attitudes perceived by students do induce a sense of skepticism towards the real aims of the business school. To the question "Why do you think your business school would behave in a way that is inconsistent to its declared culture?" student 2 affirmed, "Honestly, I think it's just a matter of applications. What is that the applicants care about? – The environment. Then let's say we care about the environment". Student 6 declared, "I think it is to gain a better reputation and brand image, to appear in newspapers as "the most sustainable university in the country" so that they can attract more students". Student 7 replied, "Selling themselves with sustainability is a smart move because it makes students apply for the business school". Student 10 argued, "Of course it's always easy to talk the talk and especially at B they

are amazing at communicating. I mean you can see from the number of students that they get every year that they are doing something good in terms of communication. But I think that they are just following this trend in order to attract students. Informants 13 declared, "Probably they see other business schools promoting sustainability, and they want to keep up with them". Interviewee 15 replied, "It's fancy to state "we are a sustainable university". I think it would attract more students, but on the other side you have to live up to these claims that you are sustainable". Thus, students seemed to believe that their business schools' environmental claims are driven by hidden ulterior motives, such as attracting new students and gaining a better reputation. All seventeen students expressed skepticism towards the real aims and purposes of their business schools.

4.4 Students' reaction to business schools' greenwashing attitudes

The last questions asked to students aimed at understanding how they respond to greenwashing attitudes undertaken by their business schools. The first theme that emerged from the last set of questions is the disappointment and delusion developed towards their institutions combined with a lost sense of pride in school belonging. Student 1 declared, "For me, it was very disappointing to come to the realization that my school is not sustainable. One of the reasons why I applied here was because I read on their website that they are doing a lot in terms of sustainability". Respondent 8 instead said, "I am a representative of this school, and this school will be in my curriculum for the rest of my life. If this school has a bad reputation, this will also affect my career, especially in the field of sustainability". Finally, student 19 declared, "I feel betrayed in the sense that I was sold an idea and I thought I would have been in a school that shares the same values as me and that was working for a better world with me, while in reality, it is completely the opposite".

However, despite the common belief that business schools have the responsibility to spread awareness regarding the topic of sustainability and, despite the widespread feeling of

disappointment towards greenwashing attitudes undertaken by students' higher education institutions, surprisingly few students gave consequential answers when asked if they would have changed their application decision if they were given the options to do so. As a matter of fact, answers revealed that students are conscious and care about sustainability, but not always up to the point of being willing to change university. More specifically, just five students declared that they would have changed their application decision knowing in advance about their business schools' greenwashing attitudes. On the other hand, 15 students stated that they would not change their application decision. Among these, 6 interviewees expressed their concerns about the inability to identify alternative business schools that are genuinely environmentally committed. Student 7 indeed replied, "I would choose this university again because nothing tells me that other universities that I would go to wouldn't do the same". Similarly, Respondent 10 stated, "I don't feel that many business schools are truly focusing on this sustainability trend, so you don't really have many choices". Student 16 declared, "If I had another option that would hopefully be better, then yes, I would probably change, but who tells me they aren't doing the same things?". Finally, respondent 19 replied, "At least here they are doing the bare minimum amount. If you compare with other national business schools, they are not doing a lot". As for the remaining nine students, their decision not to change business school appeared to be related to the school's ranking and reputation. Student 3 stated, "I would look more in terms of rankings and reputation of the business school". Informant 9 declared, "I would not change my decision because I did not apply to this business school due to its sustainability aspects". Accordingly, student 15 said, "I would choose C again because it is a good university and, in the end, it is also important that you find a good job".

To provide additional empirical grounding to the findings, a table containing additional quotes per aggregate dimension can be found in Appendix 4.

5. Discussion

The systematic gathering of data, obtained from the 20 interviews conducted with students from 11 different European business schools, allowed the development of a model that explains how greenwashing is perceived in European business schools and how students respond to it. This model builds on the assumption that students perceive business schools as crucial players in shaping future leaders' minds. They might indeed contribute to foster sustainability thanks to their educational role. Put simply, business schools have the potential but also the responsibility to transmit to the students what are the values that should drive their actions and behaviors. Thus, business schools should lead by example. Unavoidably, this great responsibility sets business schools in a critical position in which their activities are constantly under the students' spotlight. In particular, for a business school that portrays itself as a sustainable actor seeking to create a class of environmentally conscious leaders, it is of utmost importance to be consistent with its claims. This is because, as soon as inconsistencies between the business schools' claims and actual behaviors are perceived, a series of adverse effects will unleash and backfire against them. Students would indeed lose their sense of pride to belong to the school and develop a feeling of disappointment towards their institution. Lack of trust would generate in students a sense of skepticism towards the real aims and purposes that drive not only their own educational institution's actions and claims but also those of business schools in general.

Nonetheless, greenwashing attitudes would not necessarily change students' application decisions. As a matter of fact, factors such as the school's overall reputation and ranking position seem to count more than sustainable commitment when it comes to choosing the university where to pursue a degree. Understanding to what extent sustainable commitment would affect students' application decisions might represent the object of future research and investigation.

Getting to the core of the model, students have demonstrated to perceive the phenomenon of greenwashing in their business schools through three different attitudes. Greenwashing is first perceived when a business school declares to care about ecological and social issues and, hence, claims to be educating a class of responsible and ethical leaders, while these claims are not genuinely reflected in the institution's curricula structure. In line with Waddock's argumentations (2020), students perceive that despite declaring themselves as sustainable leaders, business schools still deliver knowledge based on dominant economic and management theories that create significant social disparities and ecological issues. Although they might introduce into their curricula courses related to sustainability, its core principles are not integrated into all the remaining courses. Rather, principles and theories taught in the remaining courses are perceived as inconsistent with the golden rules of sustainability and, consequently, with the school's professed culture. Thus, greenwashing is firstly perceived when the whole set of topics and theories delivered to scholars through courses are inconsistent with the school's disclosed environmental and social consciousness.

Secondly, greenwashing is perceived when the environmental consciousness of the school is not reflected in campus life. Students indeed perceive that some on-campus practices are inconsistent with the idea of caring about the environment. When, for instance, they heavily rely on plastic, paper, water, or energy, business schools are perceived as embracing unsustainable habits that they should rather discourage and disapprove. As a matter of fact, by their very nature, these institutions should lead by example and, hence, through their actions, they should educate students to act sustainably. However, students perceive that, while sustainable business schools should promote the avoidance of unsustainable practices, they are the very first actors failing to break any type of environmentally unconscious attitudes.

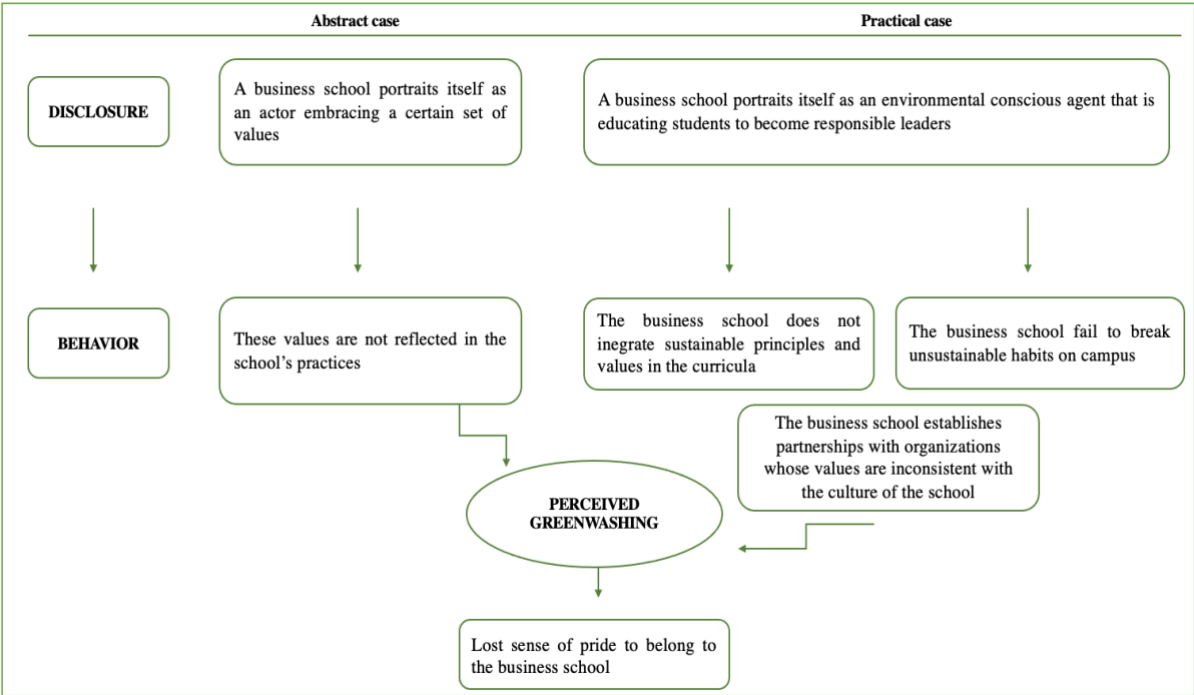
Finally, greenwashing is also perceived when a business school establishes partnerships with external organizations whose values are likely to be incompatible with those declared by the

school. Students seem to deeply care about the external relationships established by their business schools as they allow them to understand the true motives and aims driving the higher education institution. Additionally, even if a business school's aims were pure, partnering with organizations whose goals are plainly in contrast with sustainability principles would certainly undermine a school's capability to achieve its own goals.

Thus, greenwashing attitudes in business schools are perceived by students whenever these actors behave inconsistently with regard to their disclosed environmental commitment. If claims about environmental consciousness are to be made, it is crucial to be consistent with these very claims. If a business school wishes to portray itself as a sustainable leader, then sustainability traits should be reflected in every aspect of the school: from the courses delivered to the partnerships established.

Independently from the fact that a business school truly engages in greenwashing attitudes or not, the model reveals that when students perceive tensions between a school's professed environmental consciousness and activism and its actual behavior, they will develop a sense of disappointment towards their higher education institution. More specifically, the model suggests that business schools' greenwashing would generate in students a lost sense of pride to belong to the given school. A visual representation of the final model showcasing how students perceive greenwashing in European business schools can be found in figure II.

Figure II. Visual representation of how students perceive greenwashing attitudes in European business schools. Source: Self-developed.



5.1 Limitations and directions for future research

Regardless of the findings of the above-presented model, one should bear in mind its limitations. The first limitation revolves around the fact that the research focuses on mere perceptions. Perceptions might not necessarily be reflective of true greenwashing attitudes undertaken by business schools. For example, universities may be investing in environment-friendly programs that students misperceive or are simply unaware of; alternatively, the business school segment of the university may not reflect the guiding principles of the university’s central administration. In this regard, future studies might determine, independently from any types of perceptions, the objective conditions under which a business school might be alleged of greenwashing. The second limitation has to do with the fact that the model focuses uniquely on greenwashing attitudes perceived by only one of the business schools’ stakeholders, namely the students. Students’ perceptions might indeed not necessarily coincide and represent the perceptions of the other groups of business schools’ stakeholders,

such as faculty or alumni. Due to the limited scope of the analysis, not all different stakeholders' perceptions have been taken into account, and hence, some potentially relevant information on how greenwashing is perceived in business schools might have been omitted. Upcoming work could further investigate how the different groups of stakeholders perceive greenwashing attitudes in the educational context. This might contribute to a more comprehensive understanding of the phenomenon. Lastly, the whole process of categorization and documentation was conducted by the author alone excluding any possibility of potential interviewer bias. This assumption might be debatable if one considers that Gioia's methodology encourages the adoption of an outsider perspective. As a matter of fact, being too close and adopting the informant's view might induce to lose the higher-level perspective necessary for informed theorizing (Gioia, Corley, and Hamilton 2013). Therefore, a study where data would possibly be categorized by more than one analyzer would confirm the model's validity.

6. Conclusions

The starting point of this study was the consideration that there is little to no research related to the phenomenon of greenwashing in the educational context. This is surprising, especially in light of the widely accepted view that higher education institutions may play a paramount role in fostering sustainability (Lozano et al. 2013; Dagiliute and Liobikiene 2015; Beynaghi et al. 2016; Wang et al. 2013). No previous investigation has been conducted to verify if the current environmental consciousness trend may be leveraged by these very institutions to achieve different goals. After all, the fact that so far, the term "greenwashing" has been adopted solely to refer to the phenomenon by which corporations mislead consumers about their environmental performance or the environmental benefits of their products or services (Delmas and Burbano 2011), does not necessarily imply that this phenomenon exclusively exists in the world of businesses. Thus, inductive research has been conducted to develop a model assessing how

students perceive greenwashing attitudes in European business schools. The latter represent actors that educate and prepare the future class of managers who will one day run businesses (Smith and Rönnegard 2016). The research results suggest that greenwashing attitudes are perceived by students when environmental consciousness and sustainable core values are not transversally integrated into every aspect of the school organization. The discrepancy between the schools' apparent culture and their real actions and behaviors induces students to believe that what actually drives business schools' behavior drastically deviates from their declared motives. They tend to believe that business schools' actions are driven by non-disclosed reasons or hidden motives, such as attracting more students and gaining a better reputation. This confirms that Argyris and Schön's theory of action also applies in the context of higher education institutions that are perceived to be engaging in greenwashing. However, since this research aims to initiate a scientific inquiry on the topic of greenwashing in the educational context by merely focusing on students' perceptions, the developed model is not suggesting that business schools' engagement in greenwashing is undertaken consciously or unconsciously. Nonetheless, further research to thoroughly investigate if inconsistent attitudes occurring in business schools are undertaken voluntarily is strongly encouraged. Additionally, previous studies related to the phenomenon of skepticism (Forehand and Grier 2003; Obermiller and Spangenberg 1998), also find an application in this model. Greenwashing perceptions indeed induce a sense of students' skepticism towards the authenticity of a business schools' environmental claims. As a matter of fact, greenwashing attitudes lead students to believe that the environmental consciousness of their business schools is driven by more nuanced motives. In this regard, further research might contribute to understanding if the solutions proposed by Forehand and Grier (2003) to reduce consumers' skepticism towards companies' communication might also be implemented in the case of higher education institutions that are perceived to be engaging in greenwashing.

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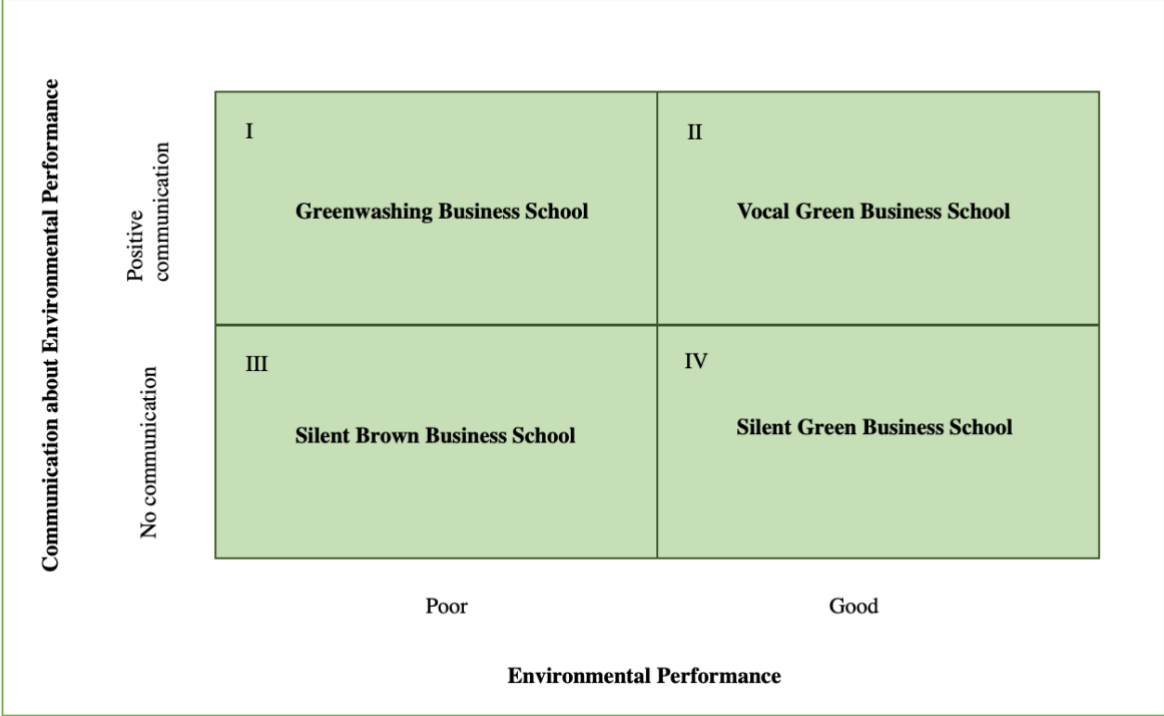
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Appendix

1. Typologies of Business Schools based on Environmental Performance and Communication (Modified version of Delmas and Burbano 2011).



2. Informed consent

Informed Consent

Name: _____

Informed consent:

If you take part in this study, I will record our interview and use its content for research purposes of the master thesis at Nova School of Business and Economics. The audio track will then be transcribed and stored safely. The interview transcripts can only be accessed by me.

Are you happy if I record this interview? (Under the conditions stated above)

Yes No

Sign and Date: _____

3. Interview protocol

Interview protocol

Introduction to the interview:

Thank you for your availability in participating in this interview. Your answers will be used to answer the research question for the thesis that I am conducting at Nova School of Business and Economics. I aim to understand your perceptions about some attitudes and behaviors undertaken by your business school. Hence, there is no wrong or correct answer to my questions, it's just a matter of expressing your opinion and your perceptions.

I would like to underline that the data I will obtain from this interview will be used anonymously. Thus, I kindly ask you to be as honest as possible. If you agree, I will record this interview and I will be the only person who will have access to the recordings. Any published work that could derive from this research will never disclose your real name or the name of your business school.

Questions:

1. Can you tell me at which university you are pursuing your degree?
 2. What do you think is the main role of business schools today?
 3. Are you familiar with the concept of sustainability?
 4. Do you think that business schools play a role in fostering sustainability?
 5. Do you think that business schools should adopt sustainable practices? Why?
 6. According to your knowledge, is your business school claiming to be sustainable?
- If the answer to question 6 is "No", this interview cannot be used for the data analysis because an essential criterion to be talking about greenwashing is missing. To interrupt the interview smoothly explain in detail why the interviewee cannot continue. Thank the student for the availability.
 - If the answer to question 6 is "Yes" continue with the following questions:
7. According to your knowledge, which practices is your university claiming to adopt to declare itself as sustainable?
 8. Do you feel any inconsistency or tension between the sustainable mindset your business school claims to have and its true behavior? (Tell the student he/she can take some time to think before answering the question)
 - If the answer to question 8 is "Yes" continues with the following questions:
 9. Would you please tell me what kind of inconsistencies do you perceive?
 10. Why do you think would your business school do that?
 11. How do you feel about this discrepancy/inconsistency?
 12. Would you change your decision in terms of application if you could go back in time?
 - If the answer to question 8 is "No", continue with the following questions:
 9. Would you please explain to me what makes you believe that there are no inconsistencies? Can you provide some examples?
 10. How would you feel in the case in which your university wouldn't be consistent with its claims?
 11. Would you change your decision in terms of application if you could go back in time and assuming that your business school would be inconsistent?
 12. What could be the possible reasons why business schools would claim to be doing something that they are not doing in practice?

4. List of quotes per aggregate dimension

Expectations to act as a role model	Environmental consciousness is not transversally incorporated in every aspect of the school organization	Lost sense of pride to belong to the business school
<p>If business schools pass the idea through their actions that people and the environment are secondary, then this is going to be the way they are going to be seen in the workplace</p>	<p>Normal courses do not incorporate elements of sustainability, but the people who need the most to learn about it are the ones not interested in the topic</p>	<p>I feel disappointed. I feel I have been lied to and now there is a lack of trust</p>
<p>In general, I think all institutions should work towards a greener future, but business schools are among the main institutions who should do that as they educate the future class of managers</p>	<p>I think the energy consumption at C is huge because the AC is on all the time</p>	<p>I was really shocked because I thought that my business school truly cared about sustainability</p>
<p>I believe that the role of business schools is changing. They should move in a direction of making students better persons. Once they will be managers, they should not only be concerned about the short-term, but also about the long-term</p>	<p>My business school wrote an article for a national journal saying that students suggested them to have those sensors on the water taps so you would pass your hands below and the water would come in, which do not exist on campus. But in the article, they said we suggested it and they "immediately implemented it"</p>	<p>I feel betrayed. When you choose a school is because you identify yourself with the values of that school. You are choosing your next home and if you are being sold a fake home, it's not nice when you find it out</p>
<p>I definitely believe that business schools play a role in fostering sustainability because by forming future managers, they are the main drivers of their actions. People who study in business schools will most likely be the ones having top jobs in the world. If those people have a different kind of mindset compared to 20 years ago, there is also a chance that they will implement the values they are taught in their future organizations'</p>	<p>A business school obviously has this whole green message, it really wants to showcase that they are very in the vanguard of being sustainable and being green, but it's not true. If A business school positions itself as a green university, if it is molding the future leaders, why not making Corporate Social Responsibility a mandatory course for everyone? Why, for example, is Human Resource Management mandatory and Corporate Social Responsibility is not? I think this really showcases the importance that the school gives to specific parts of the business world and the ones that they are disregarding</p>	<p>It is horrible to see that many institutions have fallen into this habit of trying to sell something they don't really care about. For me it was very disappointing to come to the realization that my business school is not sustainable at all and that basically everything that they say is just like steam.</p>