

## **Exploring the Influence of Green Transparency Improvement on the Trust Repair after Greenwashing**

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### **Abstract**

The growing rise in demand and consumption of green products has led to firms increasingly utilising green brands to derive competitive advantage and brand benefits (Chen and Chang, 2013). However, the growing manifestation caused by greenwashing has made successful brands to lose their consumers' brand trust (Guo et al., 2018; Chen and Chang, 2013) as well as brand equity (Akturan, 2018; Chen, Tien, Lee and Tsai, 2016). This requires an effective brand strategy to be put forward to repair green brand trust after greenwashing (Guo et al., 2018). Previous research has explored different trust repair strategies including apologies (Pace, Fediuk and Botero, 2010), donations (Xia, Teng and Gu, 2019; Brown, Buchholtz and Dunn, 2016), denial (Fuoli, van de Weijer and Paradis, 2017), commitment (Schweitzer, Hershey and Bradlow, 2006), and excuses (Tomlinson and Mayer, 2009). Despite recent development of the prior literature, our understanding of trust repair mechanism after greenwashing is still limited (Guo et al., 2018). This study seeks to gain insights into the puzzle of organizational-level strategies for trust repair (green transparency improvement) and its influence on green brand authenticity, which plays a significant mediating role in the brand trust repair process. It contributes to the extant body of the literature by providing an authenticity perspective for understanding trust repair to green brands. Building on theory of organizational trust repair mechanism, our framework will explore the impact of green brand transparency on the green brand authenticity.

**Keywords:** Green brand, brand authenticity, green transparency, green brand image, trust repair.

**JEL classification:** M31.

### **1. Introduction**

The growing rise in demand and consumption of green products has led to firms increasingly utilising green brand to derive competitive advantage and brand benefits (Chen and Chang, 2013). Compared to conventional brands, green brands have offered higher environmental protection and energy efficiency. They also consist a series of green attributes and benefits, which appeals to consumers' purchase preference. According to Mintel reports, there were only 5 green brands in 2002. But the number of green brands had increased to 328 in 2007 (Crowley, 2008). Although enterprises take a more positive attitude towards creating green brands. But not all companies are sincere to cultivate green brands, as there is a growing concern about firms adopting greenwashing strategies to acquire financial return (Rahman, Park and Chi, 2015). Consequently, greenwashing issues dampen honest organizations' green investment initiatives, raise consumers' skepticism towards green brands, and have a negative influence on green brand trust and green brand authenticity (Nguyen, Yang, Nguyen, Johnson and Cao, 2019). As such the demand for green brand trust repair is increasing substantially at

a wider level. It has also become a significant way for leading firms to rebuild their brand image and gain brand trust.

The loss of brand trust not only affects the relationship between enterprises and consumers, but also deeply affects the cooperative relationship between enterprises (Martins, Faria, Prearo and Arruda, 2017). This requires an enterprise to consider whether it is necessary to repair the brand trust after the greenwashing, either as a strategy to maintain its relationship with its suppliers or impact its image in the eyes of consumers. Greenwashing is not only to cause damage to financial performance for individuals (Walker and Wan, 2012), but more seriously to cause loss of public benefit (Pearse, 2012). Therefore, when the greenwashing is exposed, it remains crucial to take strategies to repair the brand image and regain the brand trust.

At present, the literature on brand trust repair is very limited (Guo et al., 2018). Previous research has explored different trust repair strategies, such as apologies (Pace, Fediuk and Botero, 2010), donations (Xia, Teng and Gu, 2019; Brown, Buchholtz and Dunn, 2016), denial (Fuoli, van de Weijer and Paradis, 2017), commitment (Schweitzer, Hershey and Bradlow, 2006), and excuses (Tomlinson and Mayer, 2009). However, previous literature has paid more attention to the personal trust repair, and less attention to the trust repair between organizations. On the basis of the existing research, this study will reveal the process of rebuilding brand image and regaining brand trust after exposure to greenwashing behavior from the perspective of the green brand authenticity. As such, this study aims to answer the following research questions:

*RQ1: What is the impact of green transparency on green authenticity?*

*RQ2: What are the direct and indirect effects of green brand authenticity on trust repair?*

Green brand is an enduring concern (Olsen et al., 2014). The trust repair after greenwashing behavior of green brand is also very important for the company (Li-min and Ting, 2016; Guo et al., 2018), but there seems to be a lack of literature on the research of brand trust repair from the perspective of the green brand authenticity. Hence, this study seeks to gain insight into the impact of relevant strategies (green transparency improvement) on the green brand authenticity and its role in trust repair. Specifically, what is the impact of green transparency improvement on the green brand authenticity? What is the effect of the green brand authenticity on the green brand trust repair?

We answer calls for research regarding trust repair (Guo et al., 2018) and seek to contribute to the extant literature and improve our understanding in this area. We combine two kinds of trust repair strategies which are widely used nowadays. Under the background of green brand, we combine this strategy with authenticity to study the process of trust repair between enterprises and other stakeholders in their supply chain. In this study, the authors are aiming to fill the gap in the literature and explore the impact of green transparency improvement on the green brand authenticity, and ultimately achieve the purpose of trust repair.

## **2. Literature Review**

### **2.1 Green transparency**

Transparency has always been a hot topic in various fields (Khosroshahi, Rasti-Barzoki and Hejazi, 2019). Although the application of transparency in the research of corporate sustainability and environment related topics has increased in recent years, but the research is still limited (Khosroshahi et al., 2019). However, these studies show the importance of transparency and its high impact on consumer behavior and manufacturers' environmental attitudes. In the existing literature, transparency plays an important role in the sustainable development of enterprises. Environmental transparency has been proved to have a positive impact on willingness of customers to participate in environmental programs (Vaccaro and

Echeverri, 2010), customers' willingness to pay (Egels-Zandén and Hansson, 2016; An, 2013), CSR concerns of enterprises and local governments (Haddad, 2015), environmental performance of companies (Arena, Bozzolan and Michelon, 2015), production of green products (Li and Li, 2012), and financial performance (Shvarts, Pakhalov and Knizhnikov, 2016).

"Green visibility", that is, "green can be seen" is significantly related to consumer loyalty (Brick, Sherman and Kim, 2017). Hence, green brands should convey transparent green information to win targeting consumers than alternative brands. Green transparency refers to the behaviours that a green brand embodies explicit information about environmental policy and its honest clarification of the environmental impact on its production process. transparency influences not only environmental behaviour but also company–stakeholder relationships (Vaccaro, 2010). Green transparency is also beneficial for green brands to communicate their green values by improving the transparency of sustainability related information as well as the real motivation of green practice, which is the key to enhance green brand authenticity. Transparency and honesty are critical to corporation response to an organization-level failure (eg. greenwashing) (Korsgaard et al., 2002). The higher the transparency of the brand, the more information the public is allowed to obtain, the better the brand image will be formed and finally the brand trust will be achieved. On the contrary, if the company is not transparent, the organization may alienate the stakeholders, thus causing the public to suspect it (Poppo and Schepker, 2010).

## 2.2 Green brand authenticity

The word "authenticity" originated from the Greek "authentikos", which is a credible alternative. Kennick (1985) described it as authenticity, Steiner and Reisinger (2006) observed that when consumers associate authenticity with their identity, authenticity will produce corresponding results. In the early stage, it can be said that authenticity is a much more complex phenomenon than the simple fact of being genuine or original (Alexander, 2009). When authenticity is introduced into the field of marketing, it has been widely proved to play a prominent role in consumer behavior and corporate brand building (Hernandez-Fernandez and Lewis, 2019).

The authenticity of green brand has always been a fundamental focus within the brand management literature (Beverland and Farrelly, 2010; Ewing, Allen and Ewing 2012; Gen, Juan and Xixinag, 2019). It refers to consumers' subjective perception and evaluation of green brands on the basis of its inherent attributes and their own experience and knowledge (Chin et al., 2019). With the emergence of brand authenticity, scholars began to explore the dimensions of brand authenticity from different categories and perspectives (Eggers et al., 2013; Morhart et al., 2014; Napoli et al., 2014). In this manner, Beverland (2006) put forward the dimensions of brand authenticity in the study of the authenticity of high-end red wine brands, including: Heritage and pedigree, stylistic consistency, quality commitments, relationship to place, method of production, downplaying commercial initiatives. Eggers et al., (2013) explored the relationship between brand authenticity and the brand growth of small and medium-sized enterprises (SME) from the perspective of CEO and present the dimensions of brand authenticity as brand consistency and customer orientation. In addition, he also pointed out that brand authenticity can cultivate brand trust and promote the development of SME (Eggers et al., 2013). Moreover, an increasing number of scholars believe that there is an influence relationship between brand authenticity and brand trust (Portal, Abratt and Bendixen, 2019; Schallehn, Burmann and Riley, 2014; Moulard, Raggio and Folse, 2016).

Previous studies have also highlighted that brand authenticity has an impact on consumers' brand identity (Brown, 2013; Spiggle, Nguyen and Caravela, 2012), brand trust

(Assiouras et al., 2015), brand attachment (Choi et al., 2015), word of mouth recommendation (Morhart et al., 2015) and purchase intention (Plevoets and Van Cleempoel, 2011). More than that, the improvement of the green brand authenticity can not only improve the organizational performance (Cason and Gangaharan, 2002) and shape the brand image (Gen, Juan and Xixinag, 2019). The perception degree of brand authenticity elements (quality commitment, sincerity and inheritance, etc.) will affect the enthusiasm of word-of-mouth recommendation (Ilicic and Webster, 2014; Morhart et al., 2015; Xu Wei, 2015). Once the authenticity of the green brand is improved, the brand image will be promoted effectively and then the brand trust will be improved. Portal, Abratt and Bendixen (2019) confirm that brand authenticity does have a direct impact on brand trust, while enthusiasm and ability to a certain extent regulate the relationship between brand authenticity and brand trust.

At present, the research highly recognizes that green brand authenticity has an important impact on customer behaviour (Gen, Juan and Xixinag, 2019; Portal et al., 2019). In recent years, greenwashing has happened frequently (Rahman, Park and Chi, 2015). When consumers doubt the authenticity of such "green brands", their "green wash" behaviour will affect the reputation and financial performance of enterprises (Walker and Wan, 2012). Moreover, once consumers are sceptical or distrustful of the brand, it will directly affect consumers' perception of corporate behaviour motivation, and then affect consumers' purchase behaviour (Marques and Almeida, 2013; Parguel, Benoît-Moreau and Larceneux, 2011). Frequent occurrence of "green wash" phenomenon, lack of third-party certification, and consumers' inability to perceive the environmental friendliness and resource saving characteristics of green brands that cause the public to have doubts about the green attributes of green products, and the root cause of such doubts is the public trust of consumers to green products (Ginsberg and Bloom, 2004). It can be seen that green brands have to improve the authenticity of their own brands in order to gain brand trust and brand reputation.

### **2.3 Green brand image**

Brand image has been defined as consumers' psychological impression of products, which contains symbolic meaning, that is, consumers are associated with specific attributes of products or services (Keller, 1993; Bibby, 2011). Sääksjärvi and Samiee (2011) argued that brand image as a series of memories that lead to consumers' perception of brand. Green brand image is based on the development of brand image, which is consumers' brand perception related to environmental commitment and environmental problems (Chen, 2010). Because of this, green brand image has all the functions and attributes of brand image (Chen, 2010).

From the perspective of consumers, brand image can help consumers to recognize their needs and satisfaction with the brand (Hsieh, Pan and Setiono, 2004), help them to collect information, identify the brand, and influence their purchase decisions (Hien, Phuong, Tran and Thang, 2020; Chinomona, 2016; Aghekyan-Simonian, Forsythe, Kwon and Chattaraman, 2012), so as to reduce the purchase risk of consumers (Kwon and Lennon, 2009). From the perspective of enterprises, brand image can help enterprises to establish a market position, so as to protect the brand from other competitors (Chinomona, 2016). Not only that, brand image is also one of the preconditions of brand equity (Iglesias, Markovic, Singh and Sierra, 2019) and brand loyalty (Chen, Huang., Wang and Chen, 2020; Nyadzayo and Khajehzadeh, 2016).

### **2.4 Green brand trust repair**

Trust refers to the belief that others are honest and trustworthy (Swan, Bowers and Richardson, 1999). Trust is the basis of a transaction or exchange relationship and has a positive impact on the development of customer attitudes, intentions and behaviors (Mosavi and Ghaedi, 2012; Hoq, Sultana and Amin, 2010; Swan, Bowers and Richardson, 1999). Trust

repair entails improvement in a consumer trust after it was damaged like greenwashing (Bozic, 2017), for the process of trust restoration, he argued that the first thing is eliminate the negative emotions of consumers. Through Bachmann et al. (2015) research, There are six key mechanisms in the trust repair mechanism, they are sense-making, relational approach, regulation and formal control, ethical culture and informal control, transparency and accountability, trust transference. Hickman and Jackson (2017) argued that by acknowledging the fault and apologizing for it, a familiar brand is more likely to regain trust. Recently, with the development of blockchain technology, some scholars use of blockchain technology to repair brand trust in the digital space (Fleischmann, Ivens and Krishnamachari, 2020)

However, green brand trust is fragile, especially compared with individuals, it is more difficult to repair trust between organizations (Kim, Cooper, Dirks and Ferrin, 2013). Therefore, it is vital to determine the right brand strategy to repair trust after green washing (Lewicki and Brinsfield, 2017). At present, many researches have focused on the problem of trust repair. It also studies the problem from the perspective of individuals (Tomlinson and Mryer, 2009; Kim, Dirks and Cooper, 2009) and organizations (Kim, Cooper, Dirks and Ferrin, 2013; Bozic, Siebert and Martin, 2019). Most scholars have explored trust repair methods, including apologies (Pace, Fediuk and Botero, 2010), donations (Xia, Teng and Gu, 2019; Brown, Buchholtz and Dunn, 2016), denial (Fuoli, van de Weijer and Paradis, 2017), commitment (Schweitzer, Hershey and Bradlow, 2006), and excuses (Tomlinson and Mayer, 2009). Meanwhile, some experts have studied the process of trust repair. Generally, they divide the trust repair into four stages: immediate responses, diagnosis, reforming interactions, and evaluation (Gillespie and Dietz, 2009). In addition, some scholars consider the trust repair from the response time dimension (Guo et al., 2018; Poppo and Schepker, 2010). Although there are more and more researches on the strategies of trust repair, but the research on trust repair from the perspective of the green brand authenticity is still limited.

### 3. Conceptual framework

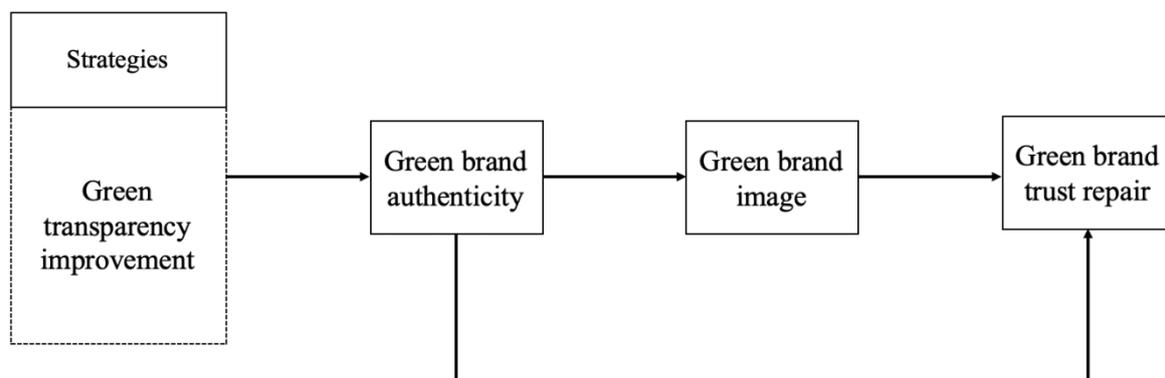
As shown in Figure 1, there is a strategie (green transparency improvement). They are postulated to have direct effects on green brand authenticity. Green brand image is expected to play a mediating role between green brand authenticity and green brand trust repair.

Crowther and Martinez (2004) argued that sustainability, accountability and transparency are the important aspects of corporate management. Transparency has previously been widely discussed in many fields. In the field of public management, the improvement of transparency is believed to promote the credibility of the government sector and thus improve citizen participation behavior (da Cruz et al., 2016). In the field of organizational management, it is considered to improve corporate social responsibility and affect organizational performance (Arena, Bozzolan, and Michelon, 2015; Shvarts, Pakhalov and Knizhnikov, 2016). In the field of marketing, transparency can improve brand image and increase consumers' purchase intention (An, 2013). Some steps and methods to improve transparency were identified by Galera, de los Ríos Berjillos, Lozano and Valencia (2014). Green transparency is based on the evolution of transparency, it refers to the green brand indicate their green attribute in products or advertisements, or disclose their environmental friendly production processes to the public (Lee and Chen, 2019; Eggert and helm, 2003). Generally, the price of products with green attributes is higher than that of general products. Providing consumers with more information about green attributes will promote their recognition of consuming green products. Consequently, customers will use the available information they receive to evaluate the authenticity of the product and make a purchase decision. (Lee and Chen, 2019).

Authenticity is defined as the consumer experience of real consumption (Beverland and Farrelly, 2010). It can be based on sincerity, innocence and originality (Fine, 2003), or

simplicity, honesty and nature. It may be related to the authenticity of an object or experience (Grayson and Martinec, 2004). Brand authenticity can be divided into indexical authenticity and iconic authenticity from consumer perspective, so is green brand authenticity. For example, green brands improve consumers' perception of brand authenticity through green labels (indexical authenticity), organic packaging materials and green product certification (iconic authenticity). Through the distinction of authenticity, we can enhance our understanding of the formation process of authenticity, especially make a significant contribution to promoting the purchase intention of consumers (Fritz, Schoenmueller and Bruhn, 2017). Authenticity is always what consumers want because it runs through all aspects of people's lives (O'Neill et al., 2014). Such as goods and services (Liang, Choi and Joppe, 2018; Grayson and Martinec, 2004), food and beverage (Beverland et al., 2008), tourism (Park, Choi and Lee, 2019; Domínguez-Quintero, González-Rodríguez and Paddison, 2020), subcultures (Fuist and McDowell, 2019), Green brand (Ewing, Allen and Ewing, 2012) and advertising (Chiu et al., 2012). Brand authenticity is important in the understanding of brand-customer relationship (Portal, Abratt and Bendixen, 2019). Majority studies have shown that brand authenticity has an impact on the relationship between brand and consumers. Such as, consumers' brand identity (Brown, 2013; Spiggle, Nguyen and Caravela, 2012), brand trust, brand attachment and brand image (Jian, Zhou and Zhou, 2019).

Park et al. (1986) argued that brand image include functional benefits, symbolic benefits, and experiential benefits. Brand image is synonymous with name, reputation, design and symbol (Kotler, 1991). Consumers use it to distinguish products and services between brands. Greve (2014) also uses a scale consisting of three items to measure brand image: value, perceived quality and uniqueness. Although many scholars have different opinions on the content of brand image, but they are all based on the viewpoint that the brand image is how consumers view the brand. Brand image is very important in enterprise management (Plumeyer, Kottemann, Böger and Decker, 2019; Bian and Moutinho, 2011). Good brand image can not only bring excellent market performance for enterprises, but also protect their brands from the influence of competitive brands (Chinomona, 2016). For consumers, brand image can provide information to distinguish brands from others, affect customer satisfaction, loyalty, purchase intention, etc (Wang and Chen, 2020; Wang and Yang, 2010). Meanwhile, the influence of brand image on brand trust has been widely proved (Alhaddad, 2015; Fianto, Hadiwidjojo and Aisjah, 2014).



*Figure 1. Framework of the research*

#### **4. Potential managerial implication and conclusion**

This work investigates the influence of green transparency on the green brand authenticity, and the effect of brand authenticity on the green brand trust repair. The results of

this study may not only provide some insights for the academics, but also for the marketing practice. In particular, this study provides some new solutions to the problem of trust repair after the exposure of green washing behavior. First of all, brand managers should understand what green attributes are, accurately identify which green attributes is most concerned by consumers, and which one makes consumers feel the authenticity of products most easily (Trang, Lee and Han, 2019). Secondly, our findings may encourage brands affected by green washing behavior to develop specific solutions to help these brands effectively improve the green transparency of products and increase consumers' perception of authenticity (Pelet, Durrieu and Lick, 2020; Riefler, 2020; Lin, Lobo and Leckie, 2017). The green brand authenticity is a powerful tool (Portal, Abratt and Bendixen, 2019; Beverland, 2005). Companies can use it to reduce consumer skepticism. Brand managers should provide sincere and effective communication, transfer the green attributes of products to consumers, enhance the effectiveness and authenticity of green brand communication, so as to regain the trust of consumers (Schnackenberg and Tomlinson, 2016). Third, brand managers should pay attention to improving the transparency of green clues and green certification to enhance the green brand authenticity, so as to achieve the goal of repairing consumer trust (Ewing, Allen and Ewing, 2012; Starr and Brodie, 2016). When consumers think that the exposed green washing brand is authentic, consumers are more likely to reestablish contact with the brand and improve their purchase intention (Chen et al., 2020). Therefore, enterprises should make rational use of green marketing mix, dare to bear the responsibility of environmental protection, strengthen the relationship between brand and consumers, enhance the green brand image, and repair the brand trust of consumers (Bukhari, Rana and Bhatti, 2017).

In 2019, Gree, a famous air-conditioning brand in China, reported to the China market regulatory authority that the energy efficiency of eight models produced by Aux, the same famous brand, was significantly lower than that claimed by Aux on its label. This incident makes Aux suspected of green washing behavior (Fan, 2019). It can be seen that although the laws and regulations issued by the state are becoming more and more perfect, the green washing behavior still occurs from time to time, which makes the trust repair after the green washing event particularly important. This paper studies the impact of green transparency on the green brand authenticity, the impact of green brand authenticity on the green brand trust repair, and the intermediary role of green brand image on the green brand trust repair. From previous studies, we have reason to believe that green transparency has a significant positive impact on four different methods of measuring the authenticity of green brand. The green brand authenticity will also directly affect the process of green brand trust repair. In addition, the green brand authenticity indirectly affects the green brand trust repair through green brand image.

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