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When Green Claims Backfire: Examining the Roles of Corporate Hypocrisy and Perceived Betrayal in Sustainable Consumption Behaviour among Generation Z

Dr Mamatha D
Assistant Professor & HoD,
B.M.S. College for Women,
Bengaluru-04
mamatha@bmscw.edu.in
ORCID iD: 0009-0001-9964-6594

Abstract - This research paper inspects how perceived greenwashing relates to sustainability focused consumption among Generation Z through perceived corporate hypocrisy and perceived betrayal, with environmental knowledge as a moderator. Quantitative cross-sectional research was conducted with 234 Generation Z respondents. The projected relationships were analysed using PLS-SEM in SmartPLS 4. Perceived greenwashing significantly increased perceived corporate hypocrisy (β = .572, p < .001), which significantly increased perceived betrayal (β = .625, p < .001). Environmental knowledge strengthened the greenwashing–hypocrisy relationship (β = .107, p = .017). However, perceived greenwashing indirectly influences perceived betrayal, the two psychological responses did not significantly predict sustainable consumption behaviour, and serial mediation was not supported. The study extends greenwashing research by examining corporate hypocrisy and perceived betrayal as sequential responses, sustainable consumption behaviour as the outcome, and environmental knowledge as a moderating condition.

Keywords: ***Greenwashing; Corporate Hypocrisy; Perceived Betrayal; Environmental Knowledge; Sustainable Consumption Behaviour***

1. INTRODUCTION

1.1 Background of the Study

Environmental sustainability is increasingly important in corporate communication and consumer decision-making. Greenwashing refers to environmental communication that creates overly positive perceptions of corporate practices (Lyon & Montgomery, 2015). When environmental claims conflict with corporate conduct, consumers may perceive corporate hypocrisy (Wagner et al., 2009), while greenwashing can reduce green purchasing intentions (Sun & Shi, 2022). Among Generation Z, perceived greenwashing may negatively affect green purchase intentions (Di Pillo et al., 2025). These responses may involve perceptions of hypocrisy and betrayal, while environmental knowledge may shape how consumers interpret environmental claims.

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1.2 Problem Statement

Environmental claims may create consumer expectations that are challenged when corporate environmental communication is varying with actual practices (Lyon & Montgomery, 2015; Wagner et al., 2009). Even though research has scrutinized greenwashing in relation to green purchasing responses and perceived betrayal, very few research has inspected the sequential roles of corporate hypocrisy and perceived betrayal in explaining sustainable consumption behaviour (Sun & Shi, 2022; Shi & Omar, 2024). This current research fills the research gap by examining these relationships along with the moderating influence of environmental knowledge (Sinha & Annamdevula, 2025).

1.3 Research Gap

Existing research links perceived greenwashing with green purchasing responses and perceived betrayal, while corporate hypocrisy has been observed as a distinct consumer perception (Sun & Shi, 2022; Guèvremont, 2019). However, inadequate research has examined the sequential relationship between greenwashing, corporate hypocrisy, and perceived betrayal in explaining sustainable consumption behaviour. The moderating role of environmental knowledge also remains less developed (Sinha & Annamdevula, 2025). Consequently, this research paper combines these constructs within the S–O–R framework.

1.4 Research Objectives

The study aims to:

1. Examine the relationships among Perceived Greenwashing, Perceived Corporate Hypocrisy, and Perceived Betrayal.
2. Examine the effects of Perceived Corporate Hypocrisy and Perceived Betrayal on Sustainable Consumption Behaviour.
3. Examine the sequential mediating role of Perceived Corporate Hypocrisy and Perceived Betrayal between Perceived Greenwashing and Sustainable Consumption Behaviour.
4. Examine the moderating role of Environmental Knowledge in the Perceived Greenwashing–Perceived Corporate Hypocrisy relationship.

1.5 Research Contributions

This study contributes by examining Corporate Hypocrisy and Perceived Betrayal as sequential data to greenwashing, extending the outcome beyond intention to purchase green products for Sustainable Consumption Behaviour, and positioning Environmental Knowledge moderating the greenwashing–hypocrisy relationship among the confines of the S–O–R framework.

2. LITERATURE REVIEW AND DEVELOPMENT OF HYPOTHESIS

2.1 Perceived Greenwashing and Perceived Corporate Hypocrisy

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Perceived greenwashing reflects consumers' perception that environmental claims create an overly positive impression of corporate practices (Lyon & Montgomery, 2015). Such claim–action inconsistencies can generate perceptions of corporate hypocrisy (Wagner et al., 2009). Recent evidence also links perceived greenwashing with corporate hypocrisy (Robertson et al., 2023). Thus, the study proposes:

H1. Perceived Greenwashing positively influences Perceived Corporate Hypocrisy.

2.2 Perceived Greenwashing and Perceived Betrayal

Perceived greenwashing may violate consumers' environmental expectations, generating perceived betrayal. Evidence shows that perceived betrayal mediates the association between green purchase intention and greenwashing (Sun & Shi, 2022; Shi & Omar, 2024). This advocates that confusing environmental claims can generate relational responses. Accordingly:

H2. Perceived Greenwashing positively influences Perceived Betrayal.

2.3 Perceived Corporate Hypocrisy and Perceived Betrayal

Perceived corporate hypocrisy reflects perceived inconsistency between a firm's claims and behaviour. Such inconsistency may violate consumer expectations and generate perceived betrayal. Chen et al. (2020) directly support for this relationship, linking corporate hypocrisy with perceived betrayal through psychological contract violation and weakened trust. Accordingly:

H3. Perceived Corporate Hypocrisy positively influences Perceived Betrayal.

2.4 Perceived Corporate Hypocrisy, Perceived Betrayal and Sustainable Consumption Behaviour

Perceived corporate hypocrisy may discourage sustainable consumption once consumers notice inconsistencies between sustainability claims and corporate conduct (Guèvremont, 2019; Cheah et al., 2023). Perceived betrayal may also encourage consumers to avoid from unsustainable consumption (Sun & Shi, 2022; Shi & Omar, 2024). Accordingly:

H4. Perceived Corporate Hypocrisy negatively influences Sustainable Consumption Behaviour.

H5. Perceived Betrayal positively influences Sustainable Consumption Behaviour.

2.5 The Moderating Role of Environmental Knowledge

Environmental Knowledge may help consumers recognise inconsistencies in environmental claims. Research shows that it influences recognition of greenwashing and moderates responses to perceived greenwash (Neureiter et al., 2024; Sinha & Annamdevula, 2025). Thus:

H7. Environmental Knowledge positively moderates the relationship between Perceived Greenwashing and Perceived Corporate Hypocrisy, such that the relationship is stronger among consumers with higher levels of Environmental Knowledge.

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2.6 Theoretical Foundation and Serial Mediation

The S–O–R framework shows in what way external stimuli impact internal psychological states and behavioural outcomes (Jacoby, 2002). Here, Perceived Greenwashing is the Stimulus, Perceived Corporate Hypocrisy and Perceived Betrayal are sequential Organism responses, and Sustainable Consumption Behaviour is the Response. Accordingly:

H6. Perceived Corporate Hypocrisy and Perceived Betrayal serially mediate the relationship between Perceived Greenwashing and Sustainable Consumption Behaviour.

3. RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

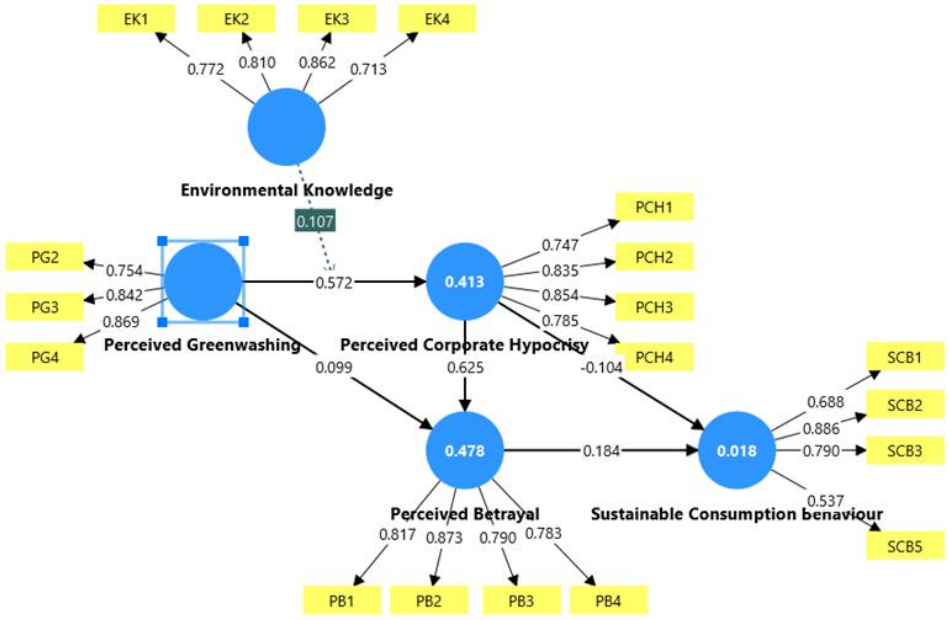


Figure 1. Structural Model

3.1 Research Design

The study uses a quantitative, deductive, cross-sectional survey design to inspect the hypothesised relations among the constructs. A structured survey was used to collect data from Generation Z consumers. PLS-SEM was utilised to test the proposed mediation and moderation effects among constructs (Hair et al., 2021; Sarstedt & Liu, 2024), using SmartPLS 4 (Ringle et al., 2024).

3.2 Target Population

The study population comprises Generation Z consumers exposed to corporate environmental claims. Eligible Generation Z respondents voluntarily participated in the survey, resulting in 234 valid responses.

3.3 Sampling Technique

A non-probability sampling approach combining convenience, purposive, and snowball sampling was used to access eligible Generation Z respondents. This type of approach is appropriate when a complete sampling frame is unavailable but limits generalisability (Andrade, 2021).

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3.4 Determination of Sample Size

Using the 10-times rule, the least sample size was 30, based on three predictors of Perceived Corporate Hypocrisy: Perceived Greenwashing, Environmental Knowledge, and their interaction. As this rule is a rough guideline, 234 consistent responses were examined in the analysis (Hair et al., 2021).

3.5 Questionnaire Development

A structured questionnaire measured five constructs: Perceived Greenwashing, Perceived Corporate Hypocrisy, Perceived Betrayal, Environmental Knowledge, and Sustainable Consumption Behaviour. Items were adapted from established literature and contextualised for Generation Z. Responses used a five-point Likert scale (1 = Strongly Disagree to 5 = Strongly Agree).

3.6 Measurement of Constructs

The study employed five constructs with reflective measures were assessed using multi-item scales. Perceived Greenwashing, Perceived Corporate Hypocrisy, Perceived Betrayal, Environmental Knowledge, and Sustainable Consumption Behaviour were calculated using items adapted from published scales (Sun & Shi, 2022; Chen & Chang, 2013; Nyilasy et al., 2014; Guèvremont, 2019; Grégoire & Fisher, 2008; Roczen et al., 2014; Mostafa, 2007; Zhang et al., 2025; Quoquab et al., 2019).

3.7 Questionnaire Pre-testing

The survey was pre-tested for clarity and suitability for Generation Z respondents, and refinements were made before the main survey. No separate pilot study was conducted.

3.8 Data Collection Procedure

The main data were collected online to eligible Generation Z respondents. The questionnaire included informed consent and a screening question on exposure to environmental or sustainability claims. Eligible respondents were recruited through the researcher's network and snowball referrals. After screening, 234 usable responses were retained for analysis.

3.9 Ethical Considerations

Respondents participated voluntarily with informed consent. Respondents' privacy and confidentiality were ensured, no identifying data was collected, and participants could withdraw at any time.

3.10 Data Analysis Technique

Data were analysed with SmartPLS 4 and PLS-SEM. The measurement model was tested using outer loadings, reliability, AVE, and HTMT, while the structural model was evaluated using VIF, path coefficients, R^2, f^2, and Q^2_predict. Bootstrapping was used to test hypothesis significance, mediation, and moderation (Hair et al., 2021; Sarstedt & Liu, 2024).

4. RESULTS

4.1 Respondent Profile

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Table 4.1. Respondent Profile (N = 234)

Variable	Category	Frequency (n)	Percentage (%)
Gender	Male	31	13.2
	Female	203	86.8
Age	18–20 years	179	76.5
	21–23 years	47	20.1
	24–26 years	6	2.6
	27 years and above	2	0.9
Education	Undergraduate Student	194	82.9
	Postgraduate Student	25	10.7
	Doctoral Scholar	5	2.1
	Other	10	4.3
Occupation	Student	190	81.2
	Student with Part-time Employment	22	9.4
	Full-time Employee	14	6.0
	Self-employed	7	3.0
	Other	1	0.4

4.2 Measurement Model Assessment

The Reliability and Validity of measurement model was tested using Cronbach's alpha, rho_A, composite reliability, and AVE (Table 4.2).

Table 4.2. Construct Reliability and Convergent Validity

Construct	Cronbach's α	rho_A	Composite Reliability (rho_C)	AVE
Environmental Knowledge	0.804	0.846	0.870	0.626
Perceived Betrayal	0.834	0.846	0.889	0.666
Perceived Corporate Hypocrisy	0.820	0.823	0.881	0.650
Perceived Greenwashing	0.764	0.793	0.863	0.678
Sustainable Consumption Behaviour	0.779	0.824	0.821	0.543

Note. *α = Cronbach's alpha; rho_A = Dijkstra–Henseler's reliability; rho_C = composite reliability; AVE = average variance extracted.*

The results show satisfactory reliability, with Cronbach's alpha, rho_A, and composite reliability values exceeding 0.70. AVE values ranged from 0.543 to 0.678, exceeding 0.50 and supporting convergent validity.

- **Indicator Reliability**

PG1 and SCB4 were removed due to low outer loadings. The retained indicator loadings ranged from 0.537 to 0.886, with most exceeding 0.70. SCB5 was retained because the construct demonstrated satisfactory composite reliability (0.821) and AVE (0.543).

- **Discriminant Validity**

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Discriminant validity was measured using the heterotrait–monotrait ratio (HTMT). The HTMT values for the study constructs are shown in Table 4.3.

Table 4.3. HTMT Discriminant Validity

Construct	EK	PB	PCH	PG	SCB	EK × PG
EK	—					
PB	.224	—				
PCH	.213	.820	—			
PG	.223	.591	.779	—		
SCB	.689	.139	.103	.116	—	
EK × PG	.187	.230	.306	.329	.221	—

The HTMT values were less than 0.85, including those involving the interaction term (EK × PG), supporting discriminant validity.

4.4 Structural Model Assessment

- **Collinearity Assessment**

Inner VIF values ranged from 1.080 to 1.893, remaining below the commonly used threshold of 5.00, indicating that collinearity was not a concern in the structural model.

- **Path Coefficients**

The path coefficients and significance results are shown in Table 4.4.

Table 4.4. Path Coefficients

Structural Path	β	t-value	p-value
Environmental Knowledge → Perceived Corporate Hypocrisy	.109	1.817	.069
Environmental Knowledge × Perceived Greenwashing → Perceived Corporate Hypocrisy	.107	2.389	.017
Perceived Greenwashing → Perceived Corporate Hypocrisy	.572	10.291	< .001
Perceived Greenwashing → Perceived Betrayal	.099	1.463	.144
Perceived Corporate Hypocrisy → Perceived Betrayal	.625	9.795	< .001
Perceived Corporate Hypocrisy → Sustainable Consumption Behaviour	−.104	0.571	.568
Perceived Betrayal → Sustainable Consumption Behaviour	.184	1.007	.314

Note. *β = standardized path coefficient.*

Perceived Greenwashing significantly increased Perceived Corporate Hypocrisy, while Perceived Corporate Hypocrisy significantly increased Perceived Betrayal. The interaction between Environmental Knowledge and Perceived Greenwashing was also significant. However, Perceived Greenwashing did not significantly influence Perceived Betrayal, and neither Perceived Corporate Hypocrisy nor Perceived Betrayal significantly affected Sustainable Consumption Behaviour.

- **Coefficient of Determination (R^2)**

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The structural model was measured using the Coefficient of Determination (R^2), which indicates the variance in an endogenous construct explained by its predictors The R^2 and adjusted R^2 values are presented in Table 4.5.

Table 4.5 Coefficient of Determination (R^2)

Endogenous Construct	R^2	Adjusted R^2
Perceived Corporate Hypocrisy	.413	.405
Perceived Betrayal	.478	.473
Sustainable Consumption Behaviour	.018	.010

Note. *R^2 = coefficient of determination.*

The model explained 41.3% of the variance in Perceived Corporate Hypocrisy, 47.8% in Perceived Betrayal, and 1.8% in Sustainable Consumption Behaviour. The low explanatory power for Sustainable Consumption Behaviour suggests that other factors may be needed to explain this outcome.

- **Effect Size (f^2)**

Perceived Greenwashing showed a large impact on Perceived Corporate Hypocrisy (f^2 = 0.485), while Perceived Corporate Hypocrisy showed a large effect on Perceived Betrayal (f^2 = 0.454). The interaction effect was small (f^2 = 0.024), while the remaining effects showed no measurable effect.

- **Predictive Assessment (Q^2_predict)**

PLSpredict produced positive Q^2_predict values for Perceived Corporate Hypocrisy (0.392) and Perceived Betrayal (0.242), while the value for Sustainable Consumption Behaviour was slightly negative (−0.003), demonstrating that the model did not demonstrate predictive significance for this construct.

4.5 Mediation Analysis

The detailed indirect effects are shown in Table 4.6.

Table 4.6. Specific Indirect Effects

Indirect Path	β	t-value	p-value
PG → PCH → SCB	−.060	0.561	.575
PG → PB → SCB	.018	0.737	.461
PG → PCH → PB → SCB	.066	0.959	.337

All three indirect effects were nonsignificant: PG → PCH → SCB (β = −.060, p = .575), PG → PB → SCB (β = .018, p = .461), and PG → PCH → PB → SCB (β = .066, p = .337). Thus, H6 was not supported.

4.6 Moderation Analysis

The moderating effect of Environmental Knowledge is shown in Table 4.7.

Table 4.7. Moderating Effect of Environmental Knowledge

Effect	β	t-value	p-value
EK × PG → PCH	.107	2.389	.017
PG → PCH at −1 SD of EK	.465	5.693	< .001
PG → PCH at Mean of EK	.572	10.291	< .001

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Effect	β	t-value	p-value
PG → PCH at +1 SD of EK	.679	11.469	< .001

The interaction between Environmental Knowledge and Perceived Greenwashing significantly influenced Perceived Corporate Hypocrisy (β = .107, t = 2.389, p = .017). The effect of Perceived Greenwashing on Perceived Corporate Hypocrisy increased from β = .465 at −1 SD of Environmental Knowledge to β = .572 at the mean and β = .679 at +1 SD. Thus, Environmental Knowledge strengthens the greenwashing–hypocrisy relationship, supporting H7.

4.7 Hypothesis Testing Summary

The hypothesis testing result outcomes are summarised in Table 4.8.

Table 4.8 — Hypothesis Testing Summary

Hypothesis	Relationship	β	t-value	p-value	Decision
H1	PG → PCH	0.572	10.291	< .001	Supported
H2	PG → PB	0.099	1.463	.144	Not supported
H3	PCH → PB	0.625	9.795	< .001	Supported
H4	PCH → SCB	−0.104	0.571	.568	Not supported
H5	PB → SCB	0.184	1.007	.314	Not supported
H6	PG → PCH → PB → SCB	0.066	0.959	.337	Not supported
H7	EK × PG → PCH	0.107	2.389	.017	Supported

Note. PG = Perceived Greenwashing; PCH = Perceived Corporate Hypocrisy; PB = Perceived Betrayal; SCB = Sustainable Consumption Behaviour; EK = Environmental Knowledge. Hypotheses were considered supported at p < .05.

5. DISCUSSION

Perceived Greenwashing significantly increased Perceived Corporate Hypocrisy, supporting H1 and confirming that perceived inconsistency between environmental claims and corporate conduct can generate perceptions of hypocrisy (Wagner et al., 2009; Robertson et al., 2023). Perceived Corporate Hypocrisy also increased Perceived Betrayal, supporting H3 and the suggested cognitive-to-affective sequence (Chen et al., 2020).

Perceived Greenwashing did not significantly impact Perceived Betrayal, while Perceived Corporate Hypocrisy and Perceived Betrayal did not significantly influence Sustainable Consumption Behaviour. The serial mediation effect was also not significant, so H6 was not supported. This differs from findings linking greenwashing and betrayal with green purchase intention (Sun & Shi, 2022; Shi & Omar, 2024). Environmental Knowledge strengthened the greenwashing–hypocrisy relationship, supporting H7 and suggesting that greater environmental knowledge may increase consumers' recognition of inconsistencies in environmental claims (Neureiter et al., 2024; Sinha & Annamdevula, 2025).

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6. IMPLICATIONS

6.1 Theoretical Implications

The study extends the S–O–R framework by positioning Perceived Corporate Hypocrisy and Perceived Betrayal as sequential responses to greenwashing. The significant greenwashing–hypocrisy and hypocrisy–betrayal relationships support this sequence. Environmental Knowledge further contributes as a boundary condition.

6.2 Managerial Implications and Policy Implications

Firms should align environmental claims with actual sustainability practices and use transparent, evidence-based communication. Regulators can strengthen oversight of environmental claims, while consumer environmental-knowledge initiatives may improve the critical evaluation of sustainability information.

7 CONCLUSION, LIMITATIONS AND FUTURE RESEARCH DIRECTIONS

The present study shows that perceived greenwashing increases perceived corporate hypocrisy, subsequently increases perceived betrayal, while environmental knowledge strengthens the greenwashing–hypocrisy relationship. However, these responses did not significantly translate into sustainable consumption behaviour, and serial mediation was not supported.

This study has four limitations. First, its cross-sectional design does not capture changes in consumer perceptions over time. Second, self-reported responses may not completely reflect actual sustainable consumption behaviour. Third, the Generation Z sample limits generalisability to other age groups and contexts. Finally, the low explanatory power for Sustainable Consumption Behaviour indicates the need to examine additional predictors.

Future research could use longitudinal designs and additional psychological or situational predictors to explain sustainable consumption behaviour. Comparative studies across age groups and contexts, together with observed purchasing behaviour, could further examine whether the relationships identified in this study vary across consumer groups.

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