

Evidence of Greenwashing in Talent Attraction: Can Job Seekers Successfully Detect Deceptive Job Advertisements?

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Abstract

This research explores the effects of greenwashing on employer branding and job pursuits. Through the lens of signaling theory, we specifically examine the interaction of deceptive green marketing and perceived green organization image, aiming to highlight the conditions under which talents disregard the authenticity of job advertisements. Across four field experiments, using a total of 941 actual job seekers, we found that genuine green marketing leads to the highest attraction scores. However, when the perceived green identity of a company is low, green marketing can lead to an even lower number of applications than no green marketing. Thus, green marketing does not increase job attraction per se. It is rather a function of identity and ad campaign design. We also found that among participants with high environmental attitudes, the negative effects of greenwashing are amplified, resulting in even lower job pursuit intentions. On the contrary, job seekers with high person-organization fit appear to be unaffected by deceptive marketing. We are among the first studies to incorporate the notion of inauthentic green employer branding in job advertising and, in doing so, provide a new theoretical viewpoint of how talent's perceptions of employers are built and modified. Our results aim to show to employers that providing misleading information harms job attraction and to provide insights on how to reduce greenwashing practices in the recruitment domain.

Keywords: greenwashing; recruitment; marketing; environmental attitude; P-O fit

Introduction

In the era of the "war for talent" (Michaels, Handfield-Jones, & Axelrod, 2001), both organizational leaders and scientists emphasize that job candidates tend to reject firms with a bad reputation (Klimkiewicz & Oltra, 2017). Montgomery and Ramus (2003), for example, found that an organization's green reputation is critical for attracting new MBA graduates. With the consistent abundance of negative information about organizations conveyed in the media, maintaining a stable employer brand, therefore, becomes an important aspect to many organizations. As a result, companies are increasingly trying to portray themselves as a sustainable employer to stay competitive and attract greater numbers of talents (bin Magbool, Amran, Nejati, & Jayaraman, 2016; Jones, Willness, & Madey, 2010; Story, Castanheira, & Hartig, 2016). The increased use of green marketing strategies may, however, also incline some organizations to disingenuously present themselves as a green employer. Deceptive green marketing is often referred to as greenwashing, a term that originates from consumer research and is a frequently cited concern of policy makers (Manrai, Manrai, Lascu, & Ryans Jr, 1997; TerraChoice, 2010).

Even though greenwashing is a common research topic, most studies examine purchasing decisions (see e.g., Bhattacharjee, Berger, & Menon, 2014). Thus, the degree to which greenwashing affects long-term decisions, such as choice of employer, remains understudied. Job choices represent a distinct type of decisions that are vastly different from day-to-day consumer choices as they often involve multiple steps, cannot be bought, and have more far-

reaching consequences. It is therefore of great interest to shed light on the interacting effects of marketing and perceived brand image or identity on job intentions. In fact, there is a present call for more research to identify and catalogue the varieties of green employer branding and measure its impacts on organizational perceptions and recruiting success (Lyon & Montgomery, 2015).

Accordingly, this research aims to study the interactive recruiting effects of corporate environmental identity and green advertising on employer perception and job pursuit intention. Specifically, we hope to show that green marketing can increase the number of applications (i.e., talent attraction) when companies are considered to have a genuine green identity (such as a sustainable outdoor clothing manufacturer). However, when a company with a low green identity (such as a petroleum and oil producer) provides misleading or disingenuous information about its environmental products, services, or overall business practices, green marketing can lead to even lower job intentions than neutral marketing.

Our study uses signaling theory as an explanatory framework to examine candidates' processing of job advertisements and the effectiveness of sustainability claims. We contribute to personnel psychology research in two ways. We aim to provide a deeper theoretical explanation for talent attraction with a special focus on disingenuous signals and bridge the two so far unrelated research areas of greenwashing and recruitment. Results may also give recruiters and policy makers practical suggestions for when it is advised to actively promote green practices and what personal characteristics might impact the job attraction process.

Perceived Green Image on Talent Attraction

When searching for a new position, job seekers form perceptions of potential employers based on incomplete information that they learn during the application process (Rynes & Miller, 1983). According to signaling theory, organizations send signals about their attributes, such as working conditions, values, and norms (Turban & Greening, 1997), and job seekers use these attributes as clues in order to match their expectations of potential employers with the organizational offer and interpret signals as predictors of future employment relations (Wanous, Poland, Premack, & Davis, 1992). Research also shows that attitudes and behaviors relating to job choice are not only influenced by the responsibilities of the job and organizational characteristics such as pay and location (Chapman, Uggerslev, Carroll, Piasentin, & Jones, 2005) but also intangible factors such as employee well-being, wealth, and green reputation (Behrend, Baker, & Thompson, 2009; Lievens & Highhouse, 2003). Corporate identity, also referred to as employer brand or image, therefore plays a crucial role in complex job search situations where it is difficult to distinguish between similar job descriptions (Garavan, Carbery, Rock, Kuchеров, & Zavyalova, 2012; Mudambi, Doyle, & Wong, 1997; Rampl & Kenning, 2014). It is described as a job seeker's mental picture of an employer brand and contains symbolic implications that refer to the specific characteristics of the brand (Cretu & Brodie, 2007; Padgett & Allen, 1997). In addition, green corporate identity entails a set of perceptions about the sustainability efforts reflected by a company's environmental performance (Nyilasy, Gangadharbatla, & Paladino, 2014).

Over the last two decades, researchers have increasingly examined green reputation and corporate identity to determine successful corporate social responsibility (CSR) practices. A number of studies found, for instance, that environmental performance scores were strongly related to reputation scores (Backhaus, Stone, & Heiner, 2002; Brammer & Pavelin, 2006; Cho, Guidry, Hageman, & Patten, 2012; Jones, Willness, & Madey, 2014; Tsai, Joe, Lin, & Wang,

2014). Additionally, the green reputation exposed to individuals can significantly impact subsequent purchasing decisions and pro-environmental behaviors (Chen, 2008; Dowling, 1986; Speckemeier & Tsivrikos, 2020; Tariq, Nawaz, Nawaz, & Butt, 2013; Wang & Tsai, 2014). In the recruiting domain, researchers found that talents are more likely to apply for positions with companies that they consider environmentally responsible as opposed to firms with a poor perceived green identity (Alniacik, Alniacik, & Genc, 2011; Backhaus, Stone, & Heiner, 2002; Behrend, Baker, & Thompson, 2009; Greening & Turban, 2000; Tsai et al., 2014). Importantly, a high perceived green image increases not only employer attractiveness but also actual application numbers and hires (bin Magbool et al., 2016; Jones et al., 2010; Story, Castanheira, & Hartig, 2016).

Linking this to signaling theory, candidates who are looking for a new position attempt to match the job offer with their aspiration of a suitable prospective employer (Wanous et al., 1992). In return, job seekers may assume that employers who claim to protect the environment might also take good care of their employees. Green reputation, therefore, signals important job attributes (Cable & Turban, 2003). Our first hypothesis builds on the idea that employers have an inherent green identity that is perceived either positively or negatively by potential employees. For instance, millennials in particular might consider working for a sustainable clothing company as more attractive than working for an oil company, simply due to an industry stigma (Klimkiewicz & Oltra, 2017). Building on this, we expect that:

Companies with a high perceived green identity attract a greater number of job seekers than companies with a low perceived green identity (H1).

Perceived corporate identity has particular importance for this research as it represents the current mental picture a candidate makes of a prospective employer (Balmer & Greyser, 2009). However, Fukukawa and colleagues (2007) notes that to successfully attract talents, corporate identity ("what we really are") should be congruent with communication ("what we say we are"). Talent attraction, thus, depends on the nexus between the perceived image and corporate communication (Gray & Balmer, 1998). Accordingly, when studying the effect of perceived company identity on job pursuit intention, it is crucial to also investigate how employers communicate about environmental subjects.

Benefits of Green Human Resources Marketing

In recent years, spending on sustainable marketing and social campaigns has increased substantially (Forbes, 2012; Nyilasy et al., 2014). To this end, many companies apply pro-environmental marketing methods hoping to build the impression of an environmentally conscious brand, which, in turn, would lead to more favorable employer image and attract greater amounts of talents. This strategy can be beneficial since corporate marketing is frequently found to contribute to building a better organizational appearance and candidate opinion (Gray & Balmer, 1998; Hoeffler & Keller, 2002). In fact, even relatively little information about a company's social performance can have a positive impact on a company's reputation (Behrend et al., 2009), and actively promoting sustainable practices has been found to attract more talents (Backhaus et al., 2002; Bauer & Aiman-Smith, 1996; Behrend et al., 2009; Boudreau & Rynes, 1985; Greening & Turban, 2000; Van der Wal, De Graaf, & Lasthuizen, 2008). Green corporate communication, therefore, plays a vital role in creating a pro-environmental employer brand (Balmer, Fukukawa, & Gray, 2007; Fukukawa et al., 2007). Accordingly, we propose that:

Companies using active green marketing attract a greater number of job seekers than

companies without green marketing (H2).

Dilemma of Green Human Resources Marketing

While green advertising can increase the perceived employer brand, not all companies are rewarded for communicating environmental practices. Organizations that claim to be environmentally conscious are often subject to closer scrutiny from governments, competitors, consumers and, potentially, job seekers (Easterling, Kenworthy, & Nemzoff, 1996; Nyilasy et al., 2014). The increase in green messages makes it more difficult for job seekers to assess the integrity of marketing messages or, in other words, to distinguish between reputation and rhetoric (Bernstein, 2009; Fukukawa et al., 2007). Furthermore, this situation could lead to a prisoner's dilemma whereby the benefits of falsely promoting green practices are higher than the payoff for being honest, yet all organizations receive a lower payoff if all companies lie rather than being honest (Parguel, Benoit-Moreau, & Larceneux, 2011). As a result, even truly responsible companies often question the potential benefits of green marketing and may even refrain from promoting green practices all together. As espoused by Kotler (2011) and Willness and Jones (2013), further research is needed to help us better understand the benefits and potentially adverse effects of green recruiting marketing and employer branding campaigns.

Disingenuous Green Marketing: Greenwashing

In the last decade, misleading green marketing, or greenwashing, has become an increasingly important topic in the psychology research due to its growing commercial use and its considerable ethical harm (Davis, 1992; Lyon & Montgomery, 2015). In recognizing greenwashing as a deceiving communication technique regarding environmental topics, many studies have tried to determine how and why companies engage in greenwashing (see e.g., Chen & Chang, 2013; De Vries, Terwel, Ellemers, & Daamen, 2015; Du, 2015; Testa, Boiral, & Iraldo, 2018). To date, the greenwashing literature provides much qualitative and anecdotal evidence that firms often do not do what they say (Alves, 2009; Furlow, 2010). According to Walker and Wan (2012), organizations aim to communicate or signal their green values to stakeholders by engaging in symbolic actions or "green talk" (Connelly, Certo, Ireland, & Reutzel, 2011). As a result, researchers suggest investigating the origin of greenwashing based on an expected interaction between advertising and actual environmental performance (Alves, 2009; Chen, Huang, Wang, & Chen, 2020; Delmas & Burbano, 2011; Furlow, 2010; Paladino & Pandit, 2012; Ramus & Montiel, 2005; TerraChoice, 2010). As we will demonstrate, job attraction is a function of advertising and perceived company image. Consequently, we also define greenwashing as candidates' reactions to situations where green advertising messaging and perceived green identity interact.

In the current literature, there is still controversy as to whether individuals succumb to deceptive marketing techniques or effectively detect misleading information. While Horiuchi et al. (2009) argue that individuals often have difficulties determining the trustworthiness of green initiatives, the majority of greenwashing literature states that individuals can successfully detect disingenuous advertising claims. Most empirical studies indicate a strong negative impact of a company's alleged irresponsible acts on attitudes towards the firm (Folkes & Kamins, 1999; Murray & Vogel, 1997). With young professionals and policy makers becoming more discerning and skeptical about the integrity of corporations, green advertising may become more of a liability than a benefit, especially when firms underperform environmentally (Du, Bhattacharya, & Sen, 2010; Easterling et al., 1996; Pomeroy & Johnson, 2009). As a result, organizations may be more inclined to refrain from using green marketing techniques.

Our research aims to provide a more nuanced view to this contradiction. We propose that while job seekers may react in a skeptical way to discrepancies between talk and action, genuine marketing can benefit from the aforementioned increase in perceived employer attractiveness and application numbers (bin Magbool et al., 2016; Jones et al., 2010; Story et al., 2016). Accordingly, when companies are genuinely pro-environmental, we predict that marketing will attract more talents due to combined benefits of identity and advertising. In other words, the impact of green advertising depends on whether the claim is considered genuine and fits into the candidate's view of the organization. Thus, we argue that green advertising in general is not a universally bad strategy, and genuine green image positively influences job seekers' attitudes towards an organization and job pursuit intentions.

Perceived corporate identity and green marketing interact such that job pursuit intentions are higher when the perceived corporate identity is high and lower when identity is low (H3).

This is not to say that companies should generally employ green marketing strategies to attract talents. However, when a company with a low green identity intentionally advertises their contributions to the environment and, to a degree, presents misleading information (such as ExxonMobil in 2012; Plec & Pettenger, 2012), green marketing can have adverse effects on talent attraction. It should, therefore, be considered as an interaction of corporate green identity and marketing practices.

In summation, we propose that green marketing can have both positive and negative effects on job pursuit intentions. Studying these could help organizations to conquer their fear of using green marketing and help policy makers and managers to make more educated branding decisions. Moreover, while the negative effects of disingenuous green marketing are unambiguous and often cited, few studies examine the positive effects of environmental performance communication (Brown & Dacin, 1997; Mohr & Webb, 2005). Lastly, the majority of greenwashing literature is consumer focused, which limits the number of studies investigating this interaction in the realm of recruiting.

Factors that Enhance or Reduce the Effect of Greenwashing

Despite its often-cited negative consequences, it is striking that many companies are still engaging in greenwashing (Delmas & Burbano, 2011; Shahrin et al., 2017; Wu, Zhang, & Xie, 2020). Consequently, we were curious to examine additional drivers of greenwashing to potentially identify factors that enhance or reduce its effect. Previous research has identified various drivers of greenwashing, including political, organizational, economical, and ethical

(Delmas & Burbano, 2011). For instance, while the lack of political regulations such as sanctions by the FTC¹ and financial pressure to stay competitive incentivize greenwashing, pressure from employees and non-governmental organizations (NGO) may decrease the use of misleading information (Torelli, Balluchi, & Lazzini, 2020; Yu, Van Luu, & Chen, 2020).

Drawing from consumer research, we infer that some people are more prone to falling for greenwashing, for instance, consumers with low environmental attitudes (Chen & Chang, 2013; Delmas & Burbano, 2011). On the contrary, environmentally conscious consumers indicate that they are willing to change brands solely based on a lack of conformity with their environmental values (Gan, Wee, Ozanne, & Kao, 2008). This is further supported by Snyder and DeBono (1985), who found that people high in environmental concerns place greater emphasis on the

¹ FTC = Federal US Trade Commission

green image portrayed than in the quality of the advertised product. Lastly, research indicates that ecologically conscious consumers tend to show more skepticism towards advertising claims (Shrum, McCarty, & Lowrey, 1995). All of the above indicate that the effect is not consistent across all individuals.

Applying this to the recruitment domain, it is likely that the perception of greenwashing depends on the candidate's environmental attitude. This notion extends our previous hypotheses that propose that job seekers are generally able to detect inauthentic job advertisements and that this detection leads to lower employer attraction and job pursuit intentions. We expect that people with a high environmental attitude (a) place an even higher value on sustainable practices (Belk, 1988; Christopher, Morgan, Marek, Keller, & Drummond, 2005) and (b) that job seekers' positive environmental beliefs make them more skeptical towards organizations, which in turn improves their ability to identify deceptive marketing content (Szabo & Webster, 2020). Thus, we hypothesize that:

There is a three-way interaction between perceived company identity, marketing, and environmental attitude (H4).

The aforementioned results make a strong case for a significant relationship between attitude and job pursuit intentions. However, it is important to note that results are somewhat contradictory. Follows and Jobber (2000), for instance, found no value congruence between environmental stance and organizations advertising green products. In their study, the positive environmental impacts of sustainable products were outweighed by the individual purchasing preferences such as convenience, accessibility, scarcity, and product quality. Accordingly, we assume that environmental attitude is not the only factor impacting job pursuit intentions. Prospective applicants interpret the characteristics of the organization based on a range of individual expectations and values (Cable & Judge, 1994, 1996). This range is often summarized under the umbrella term of Person–Organization (P–O) fit. In simple terms, talents are particularly attracted to employers that are aligned with their values. Previous research supports the relation between organizational fit and job choices (Behrend et al., 2009; Turban & Greening, 1997), and a meta-analysis by Chapman and colleagues (2005) determined P–O fit as a key predictor of career decisions.

As a result, we expect that values impacting job pursuit intention go beyond sustainability aspects, making job seekers' organizational fit an assessment of individual values and expectations of employer characteristics (Chapman et al., 2005; Kristof, 1996). Building on this idea, we hypothesize a three-way interaction between identity, marketing, and P–O fit, whereby participants with low organization fit assess the authenticity of the job descriptions more critically and, as a result, detect misleading or disingenuous information correctly. However, job seekers with high P–O fit may be less affected by the presentation of disingenuous information as their intention to work in a respective field outweighs trustworthiness. Accordingly, we propose that participants show greater approval of job ads – even when being dishonest – as long as their P–O fit is high enough.

There is a three-way interaction between perceived company identity, marketing, and P–O Fit (H5).

Overview of the Present Research

We conducted four large-scale field experiments to examine whether the perceived green identity of a company affects employer attractiveness and job pursuit intentions. Across all

studies, we used samples of actual job seekers. Studies 1 and 2 investigate the most straightforward prediction that companies with a higher perceived green identity attract a higher number of applications (H1). We varied the treatments aiming to generalize our findings, increase external validity, and potentially shed light on the differences between industries and company types. Study 3 examines our main hypothesis that green advertising and perceived green identity interact to impact job attraction. We aim to show that green marketing can have both positive and negative effects, depending on the company's perceived green identity (H3). Finally, Study 4 extends previous findings by determining under what conditions green marketing is more or less effective. Specifically, we build on the idea that job decisions are made under a number of influencing factors (Athanasou, 2003; Highhouse, Thornbury, & Little, 2007), such as predispositions toward a prospective employer (Dineen, Ash, & Noe, 2002; Zhang & Gowan, 2012). We sought to test for a three-way interaction by introducing the additional variables of environmental attitude (H4) and P–O fit (H5).

Study 1: Preferences in Job Intention by Green Company Identity

The objective of the first study was to compare two companies with distinct green identities (sustainable clothing company vs. oil company) in order to examine differences in the perceived green identity and job pursuit intention. Due to general preferences of green

over non-green employers (bin Magbool et al., 2016; Jones et al., 2010; Story et al., 2016), we expect that the sustainable clothing company attracts more job seekers than the oil company.

Procedure

One thousand eight hundred sixty members of an international talent pool of a large human resources (HR) company were invited by e-mail to participate in the study on a voluntary basis. After completing the consent form, participants were randomly assigned to one of two recruitment advertising conditions (high and low green identity) for a between-subjects experiment. The first question asked the participants to what degree they are open for new positions on a five-point scale; only participants indicating a three or higher were included in the experiment. Subsequently, participants were presented with descriptions of organizations (the treatments). Participants were aware that the job ad was not real, but the advertisements were closely modeled after actual ads posted on known job boards and approved by managers at the HR company for credibility, accuracy, and appropriateness prior to use (Weske, Ritz, Schott, & Neumann, 2019). After reading the ad, participants were asked to fill in a post-experiment questionnaire including questions about the perceived green identity of the organization (the treatment check) and their attraction to the organization.

Material

The treatments shared a "common core" based on the common core values found by Van der Wal et al. (2008) that contained fictional descriptions of organizations (such as providing a wide range of products and services) and information about what the organization offers (including flexible work hours and a competitive salary). The manipulation was achieved using different versions of the company descriptions. Moreover, the visual design of all organization descriptions was kept to a minimum and was the same for all groups. The dependent variables (DV) were the perceived green identity of the employer and job pursuit intentions. Unless otherwise noted, all measures used a 7-point scale ranging from 1 = strongly disagree to 7 = strongly agree.

Perceived green identity. Company green identity was assessed with seven items adapted from

Chen (2008). Two sample items are “The reputation of this company about environmental management is stable” and “This company is well-established about environmental management”. The mean coefficient alpha reliability was .86.

Job pursuit intention. Job pursuit intention was measured with 11 items adapted from Highhouse and colleagues (2003). Sample items are “If I was invited to interview for this job, I would go” and “I would exert a great deal of effort to work for this company”. The alpha of this scale was .88.

Results and Discussion

A total of 77 candidates ($M_{\text{age}} = 32.17$ years, $SD_{\text{age}} = 5.54$; 45% female) participated in the study. The oil company received significantly lower green identity scores ($M = 3.21$, $SD = .66$) than the sustainable clothing company ($M = 4.98$, $SD = .57$), $t(76) = -12.650$, $p < .001$, $d = .82$. This indicates that the manipulation of green identity was effective. For our first main hypothesis, we predicted that participants are less likely to apply for a job at a company with a low green identity. An analysis of variance (ANOVA) on the DV yielded a main effect of company identity on job pursuit intention, $F(1, 76) = 142.796$, $p < .001$, $\eta^2 = .914$. Participants presented with a company with a high green identity indicated significantly higher job pursuit intentions ($M = 5.76$, $SD = .79$) than those in the non-green company condition ($M = 2.26$, $SD = .85$).

The above analysis confirmed our prediction that companies with high perceived green identity attract higher numbers of job seekers than companies with a low green identity. These results correspond with current literature on CSR and applicant attraction (bin Magbool et al., 2016; Jones et al., 2010; Story et al., 2016), demonstrating that perceived company identity is an important factor in talent attraction. In addition, we were able to show that our treatments successfully manipulated the participants recognition and appraisal of the companies' green identity.

Study 2: Perceived Green Identity Across Different Industries

Study 1 provided initial evidence that job pursuit intentions are dependent on the green identity of an organization. In Studies 3 and 4, we experimentally assess the relationship of perceived identity and green marketing. Before doing so, however, we sought to replicate the findings using different scenarios, allowing us to interpret results on a wider scale of company types and ensure that the identity appraisals that emerged were not based on idiosyncratic characteristics of the two particular company preferences selected in Study 1.

Procedure and Material

We have selected a total of six different industries (namely retail, finance, travel, natural resources, automotive, and architecture), each of which includes a green and non-green condition. The selection was based on the United Nations Environment Program's list of green industries (Schulte, Heidel, Okun, & Branche, 2010) and the classification of green jobs from the Bureau of Labor Statistics (Sommers, 2013).

Participants ($N = 156$; $M_{\text{age}} = 28.58$ years, $SD_{\text{age}} = 4.21$; 51% female) could choose up to three desired industries and were randomly assigned with either the green or non-green condition. Based on these two conditions, 12 job descriptions were created for treatment. The green companies included a sustainable fashion retailer (10%), eco-friendly travel agency (10%), green hedge fund (7%), wind energy company (10%), electric car manufacturer (7%), and green building designer (8%); the non-green companies were a discount fashion retailer (10%), low-

cost airline (10%), non-green hedge fund (7%), oil company (10%), classic car manufacturer (7%), and luxury building designer (8%).

Results and Discussion

For the six conditions combined, the perceived green identity for non-green companies ($M = 3.62$, $SD = 1.03$) was significantly lower than for green companies ($M = 4.74$, $SD = .78$), resulting in $F(154, 1) = 59.531$, $p > .001$, $\eta^2 = .272$. Using independent t-tests, we found that four out of six industries reveal significant differences (see Table 1). The two conditions with insignificant results were companies in the finance and automotive industries. A potential explanation for this result might lie in the conflicting views on their sustainable impact. For instance, while electric car manufacturers can have a particularly strong green identity (such as Tesla; Mangram, 2012), most automotive companies are now offering electric cars, making the gap between the two conditions fairly small. Moreover, the production and installation of batteries can be considered harmful for the environment (Larcher & Tarascon, 2015), leading to a blurred green identity and an unsuccessful manipulation. As for the finance condition, investment companies often switch their portfolio (Patton & Ramadorai, 2013), which might conflict with a consistent green identity. For Studies 3 and 4, we will only employ those conditions with highly significant differences ($p < .001$). Job intention also differed significantly between low and high identity companies ($M = 3.90$, $SD = .87$ vs. $M = 4.25$, $SD = .84$, respectively), resulting in $F(154, 1) = 6.466$, $p = .012$, $\eta^2 = .040$. This indicates that green companies are generally considered to be a more attractive employer across industries. Against our prediction, we did not find significant results in all conditions (see Table 1).

Table 1

Descriptive statistics on job pursuit intentions and perceived green identity.

| | N | % | Perceived green identity | | | | Job Intention | | | |
|---------------------------|----|------|--------------------------|------|---------|---------|---------------|------|---------|---------|
| | | | Mean | SD | t-value | p-value | Mean | SD | t-value | p-value |
| Retail | 26 | 16.7 | | | | | | | | |
| Discount fashion | 11 | 7.1 | 3.46 | 1.02 | | | 3.74 | 0.66 | | |
| Sustainable fashion | 15 | 9.6 | 4.91 | .72 | -4.266 | .000 | 4.24 | .71 | -1.827 | .080 |
| Finance | 22 | 14.1 | | | | | | | | |
| Non-Green Hedge Fund | 7 | 4.5 | 4.06 | 1.24 | | | 4.06 | .39 | | |
| Green Hedge Fund | 15 | 9.6 | 4.71 | .70 | -1.573 | .131 | 5.09 | .24 | -.074 | .942 |
| Travel | 27 | 17.3 | | | | | | | | |
| Low-cost airline | 16 | 10.3 | 3.62 | .84 | | | 3.66 | .81 | | |
| Eco-friendly travel | 11 | 7.1 | 4.85 | .95 | -3.563 | .002 | 4.08 | .99 | -1.208 | .238 |
| Natural Resources | 33 | 21.2 | | | | | | | | |
| Oil | 18 | 11.5 | 3.44 | 1.11 | | | 3.78 | .93 | | |
| Wind energy | 15 | 9.6 | 4.82 | .50 | -4.443 | .000 | 4.33 | .91 | -1.721 | .095 |
| Automotive | 26 | 16.7 | | | | | | | | |
| Classic car manufacturer | 15 | 9.6 | 3.74 | 1.03 | | | 4.04 | .86 | | |
| Electric car manufacturer | 11 | 7.1 | 4.35 | 1.04 | -1.493 | .149 | 4.74 | .45 | -2.447 | .022 |
| Architecture | 22 | 14.1 | | | | | | | | |
| Luxury building designer | 13 | 8.3 | 3.63 | 1.11 | | | 4.28 | .92 | | |
| Green building designer | 9 | 5.8 | 4.76 | .85 | -2.570 | .018 | 4.03 | .90 | .627 | .538 |

The main purpose of the second study was to replicate the results and evaluate whether the

revealed main effect occurs across industries. The findings provide evidence that our scenarios were effective in creating variance in the green identity variable. We demonstrate that job attraction differs across other industries as well but is not significant in all cases.

Together, studies 1 and 2 successfully tested our material and confirmed that candidates are generally more attracted to organizations with a high perceived green identity (H1). While green identity was successfully manipulated using a company's organizational characteristics and general reputation, the employers did not actively advocate their sustainable practices in the job ads. Yet, nowadays many employers use job ads as a direct marketing tool to portray a desirable employer brand (Botha, Bussin, & De Swardt, 2011; Chhabra & Sharma, 2014; Sokro, 2012). In fact, many recruiters are well aware that green marketing can be an effective technique in attracting talents (Talent, 2013; Vinerean, Cetina, & Dumitrescu, 2013). In the following, we are concerned with the effectiveness of such strategies and specifically aim to answer this question: Are there limitations and even adverse effects of green marketing (i.e., implications of greenwashing)?

Study 3: The Interaction of Identity and Marketing on Job Intention

Having established that job seekers generally prefer employers with a high perceived green identity, Study 3 explores whether active green marketing enhances or damages this tendency. Specifically, we examine potential interaction effects between identity and marketing on job pursuit intention, predicting that green marketing can increase the number of applications when companies are considered as having an authentic green identity. However, when a company with a low green identity actively advertises its environmental practices, the information can be considered misleading or disingenuous, resulting in even lower application numbers than neutral marketing.

Procedure and Material

Three hundred ten job seekers ($M_{age} = 25.02$ years, $SD_{age} = 3.89$; 41% female) participated online as part of their entrance into a global talent pool. Using a between-subjects design, we provided each participant with one hypothetical job advertisement to read. Only companies that were reliably judged by the pilot study (Study 2) to have a strong perceived green identity were selected. Moreover, participants were randomly assigned, were assured confidentiality, and received the same information about what the organization offers across all conditions.

In contrast to the previous studies, we adjusted the job descriptions by adding phrases that emphasize green practices and values (i.e., active green marketing), resulting in a 2 (green vs. non-green identity) x 2 (green vs. non-green marketing) experimental design. We followed prior research (Greening & Turban, 2000; Jones et al., 2009) to manipulate green marketing in terms of environmental sustainability practices in the treatments. Environmental sustainability concerns whether the organization takes precautions to minimize any potential negative influence on the environment, emphasizes sustainable practices in the workplace, and promotes investments in green initiatives. We focused on these particular practices because (a) they are consistent with our definition of CSR, (b) they relate to the attractiveness of an organization (Backhaus et al., 2002), and (c) they represent highly discretionary aspects of green identity.

We applied this by presenting the values of the organization (the symbolic benefits), which reflected both an organization's internal and external orientation. This information was presented under the headings "our key values", "our employees about us", and "our goal". These three headings used different formulations to emphasize the same set of values. The purpose of

this was to ensure that the participants noticed the importance of these values for the organization. For example, in the non-green marketing condition, participants were told, “We always put our customers first. We strive to maximize our cost-benefit ratio and to be more successful than our competitors. To achieve it, we do not hesitate to do what it takes to create the best services [products] – at any costs.” Whereas in the green marketing condition, participants were told, “We’re in business to save our home planet. As the climate crisis deepens, we see an inevitable need to protect the environment. For us, sustainability means providing more and cleaner energy solutions in a responsible way [durable products while using less resources].”

After each ad, participants again completed items assessing their perception of the green identity of the company as well as their interest in and intention to apply for the position. We also added a one-item variable asking for the perceived authenticity of the company as a further manipulation check: “On a scale from 0-10, how authentic and trustworthy do you think this company is?” Lastly, participants answered demographic questions and were debriefed.

Results and Discussion

Before conducting the moderation analysis, we again tested for a successful manipulation. Participants correctly detected the difference between high and low green companies, $t(308) = -15.761, p < .001, d = .58$. All the subsequent analyses used ANOVA with company identity and marketing as between-subjects factors. As expected, companies with high green identity received higher job pursuit intentions than low green identity companies ($M = 4.53, SD = .95$ vs. $M = 3.24, SD = .82$, respectively), $F(1, 308) = 164.252, p < .001, \eta^2 = .346$. Green marketing strategies also result in higher job intention (with $M = 3.99, SD = .78$ in the green and $M = 3.80, SD = 1.29$ in the non-green marketing condition), resulting in a marginally significant main effect $F(1, 308) = 3.897, p < .05, \eta^2 = .042$.

Critically, the analysis revealed a significant interaction effect between identity and marketing on job pursuit intention, $F(1, 308) = 27.528, p < .001, \eta^2 = .083$, see Fig. 1. Simple effect tests show that for companies with a high green identity job pursuit intentions were significantly higher in the green marketing condition ($M = 4.67, SD = 1.04$) as opposed to the non-green marketing condition ($M = 4.35, SD = 0.79$), $F(1, 153) = 4.264, p < .05, \eta^2 = .027$. Furthermore, when companies use green marketing strategies, despite having a low perceived green identity, job pursuit intentions were even lower ($M = 2.93, SD = .84$) compared to the non-green marketing group ($M = 3.63, SD = 0.59$), $F(1, 153) = 34.417, p < .001, \eta^2 = .184$, thus confirming H3.

Results show that job seekers favor companies with a consistent green image and hesitate to apply for companies with inconsistent or disingenuous branding. It is, therefore, possible that job seekers evaluate the authenticity of a job ad before submitting an application. In order to determine whether this effect is an actual result of authenticity, we further asked participants to rate the trustworthiness of the ad. Results show a close similarity between the trustworthiness and job pursuit intention scores ($r = .287^{**}$). Companies with inconsistent branding – non-green companies with green advertising – received the lowest trust scores, $F(1, 153) = 8.762, p = .003, \eta^2 = .028$, see Fig. 1. This further suggests that job seekers are sensitive to sustainability aspects presented in job ads and can spot misleading information, again hinting toward the negative effects of greenwashing.

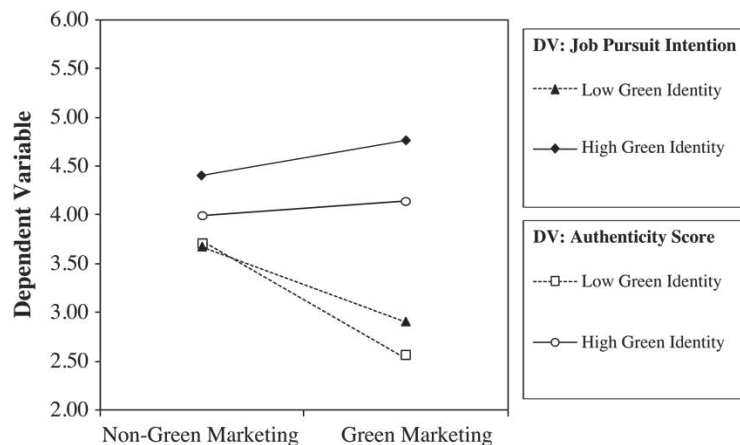


Figure 1. Interaction means plot for dependent variables—job pursuit intention and trustworthiness.

Study 3 provides further insights into the effects of green identity on job pursuit intention by detecting the moderating effect of green marketing. Consistent with our previous findings, results indicated that companies with a high perceived green identity are again favored over low green identity companies. Interestingly, job attraction scores were even higher when employers with a high perceived green identity emphasize their sustainable practices via green marketing. On the contrary, the interaction also illustrates that job seekers can detect misleading marketing, such as when employers with a low green identity disingenuously try to advertise their green policies. We can conclude that job ads attract job seekers when being consistent with the perceived company image. However, when the green identity of a company is low, green marketing can lead to an even lower number of applications than no green marketing. Thus, green marketing does not increase job attraction per se. It is rather a function of identity and ad campaign design.

Study 4: Factors that Enhance or Reduce the Effect of Greenwashing

Studies 1-3 consistently establish that green employers are more attractive than non-green employers and that falsely portraying oneself as a green employer negatively affects talent attraction. Despite its often-cited negative consequences, it is striking that many companies are still engaging in greenwashing (Delmas & Burbano, 2011; Shahrin et al., 2017; Wu et al., 2020). Consequently, are there particular conditions under which greenwashing passes for legitimate, truthful marketing?

In our final study, we examine whether (a) the effect of greenwashing on talent attraction is stable across different types of job seekers and (b) certain individuals are more prone to conceiving misleading information as trustworthy. We attempt to replicate the patterns previously observed while considering candidates' predispositions more thoroughly. We predict that the negative effects of greenwashing on job attraction are amplified when candidates have a high environmental attitude. On the contrary, when job seekers exhibit a high P–O fit, job pursuit intentions remain unaffected from communicative integrity.

Method

Four hundred current job seekers ($M_{\text{age}} = 28.61$ years, $SD_{\text{age}} = 4.26$; 38% female) participated online. Given our primary interest in how actual job seekers would make their job pursuit

decisions, and to make studies comparable, we recruited all participants using the same method as described in Study 3. Participants were again randomly allocated to one of the conditions. We used the same job advertisements and between-subjects design. Each participant received one job advertisements to read. In addition to the items assessing job pursuit and perceived green identity, participants completed three items assessing P–O fit (Cable & Judge, 1996; e.g., “To what degree do you feel your values ‘match’ or fit this employer?”), all of which showed good reliability levels with alphas ranging from .80 to .86, and four items assessing attitude (Whitmarsh & O’Neill, 2010; e.g., “I think of myself as someone who is very concerned with environmental issues”), alphas ranged from .90 to .94.

Results and Discussion

First, we again tested for our main prediction on greenwashing. Similar to Study 3, we found a significant interaction effect of company identity and marketing on job appeal, $F(1, 399) = 20.426, p = .00, \eta^2 = .049$. The highest job pursuit intentions were found in the green marketing and green company condition ($M = 5.12, SD = 1.79$) and the lowest in the green marketing and non-green company condition ($M = 2.89, SD = 1.49$), thus again confirming H3.

Environmental attitude. We found a significant three-way interaction of company identity, marketing, and environmental attitude on job pursuit intentions, $F(1, 399) = 7.343, p = .007, \eta^2 = .018$. In the green company condition, participants with high attitude reported greater attraction to green job ads ($M = 6.50, SD = 0.55$) than non-green ads ($M = 5.19, SD = 1.02$), $t(98) = -7.914, p < .001, d = .59$. In the non-green company condition, participants with high attitude favored non-green ($M = 3.32, SD = 1.11$) over green ads ($M = 2.65, SD = 1.57$), $t(98) = 2.474, p < .05, d = .24$. Lastly, companies with a low green identity received significantly higher job intentions from participants with low attitude ($M = 3.40, SD = 1.28$) than with high attitude ($M = 2.98, SD = 1.39$), $t(198) = 2.201, p < .05, d = .15$.

Results demonstrate that job seekers chose companies that are in line with their environmental attitude and that this effect can be amplified using green marketing. However, when employers advertise a green company image without having an authentic green identity, especially among environmentally conscious job seekers, ads can lead to adverse effects. In simple terms, green marketing can be highly effective when targeting the right candidates but harms employers with a low green image. In practical terms, many companies believe that by advocating a green policy they can attract environmentally conscious talents that can bring green ideas to the company (Talent, 2013). However, we showed that (a) job seekers intentionally chose employers that are in line with their environmental attitude, (b) non-green ads are actually more effective among candidates with low attitude scores, and (c) job seekers can detect inauthentic green employer brands, resulting in even lower applications than neutral ads.

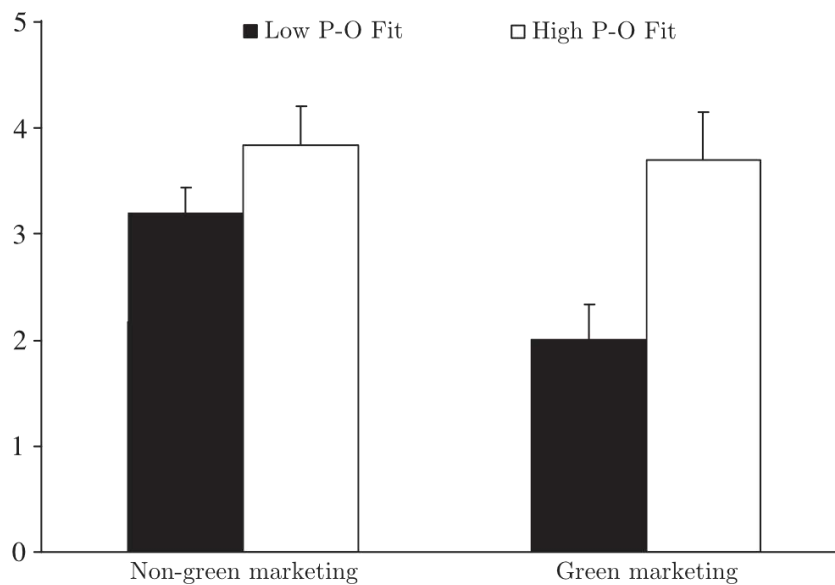


Figure 2. Interaction means plot for job pursuit intention in the non-green company condition.

Person–organization fit. Besides environmental attitude, we have also examined the moderating effect of P–O fit. Unsurprisingly, P–O fit positively correlates with job pursuit intention ($r = .360^{**}$). Thus, candidates with high identification with the organization show higher attraction to the position. Next, we sought to test whether this result can be reinforced when companies actively advertise their green policies (i.e., using green marketing). We did not find a significant three-way interaction between marketing, identity, and P–O fit. However, we did find a significant two-way interaction between P–O fit and marketing on job pursuit intention, $F(1, 399) = 30.891, p < .000, \eta^2 = .068$ (see Table 2). The lowest job intentions were found among participants with low P–O fit in the non-green company and green marketing condition, and the highest intentions were found in the green company condition among participants with high P–O fit. This is somewhat unsurprising as job seekers are again less attached to deceitful employers and potentially show a greater readiness to detect misleading information. Most importantly, in the non-green company condition, participants with low P–O fit reported greater attraction to the non-green ads than to the green ads, $F(1, 196) = 10.928, p = .005, \eta^2 = .039$, whereas job seekers with high P–O fit were indifferent between green and non-green job ads ($ps > .1$, see Fig. 2).

Table 2

Two and three-way interaction effects on job pursuit intention.

| Source | SS | df | Mean square | F | p | η^2 |
|---|----------|-----|-------------|----------|------|----------|
| Intercept | 6335.682 | 1 | 6335.682 | 5784.646 | .000 | .938 |
| Perceived Identity × Green Marketing | 42.903 | 1 | 42.903 | 39.171 | .000 | .093 |
| Perceived Identity × Attitude | 163.840 | 1 | 163.840 | 149.590 | .000 | .280 |
| Perceived Marketing × P-O-Fit | 30.891 | 1 | 30.891 | 28.205 | .000 | .068 |
| Perceived Identity × Green Marketing × Attitude | 10.785 | 1 | 10.785 | 9.847 | .002 | .025 |
| Perceived Identity × Green Marketing × P-O-Fit | .780 | 1 | .780 | .712 | .399 | .002 |
| Error | 420.579 | 384 | 1.095 | | | |

Note. DV = Job pursuit intention. R Squared = .626 (Adjusted R Squared = .611)

Overall, P–O fit can be considered a significant factor in influencing job pursuit intention. Introducing P–O fit to the evaluation of the ad authenticity and perceived green identity relationship offers deeper insights into the conditions under which job seekers chose green (or non-green) employers. Our first result confirms Cable and Judge's (1996) finding that P–O fit can increase job intentions and that participants with high P–O fit are indifferent toward company authenticity. More importantly, however, we demonstrated that high P–O fit can diminish the negative effects of greenwashing despite providing misleading or disingenuous information. This alternative account suggests that the effects of greenwashing on job appeal are not solely driven by green marketing and identity but can further be moderated by logical assessments of whether one's personal ideals and expectations match the organization's description. Essentially, this shows that when the organization fits within the expectations of the candidate, individuals tend to disregard or even miss the potentially misleading claims of sustainability (i.e., greenwashing) and indicate high job intentions despite the green claims being disingenuous.

General Discussion

Our research follows a simple question: Can genuine green companies attract as many talents as non-green companies pretending to be green? We address this question by experimentally assessing the effects of greenwashing on employer branding and job pursuit interests. Across four field experiments, we have tested various recruiting messages for their effectiveness on talent deception and employer attractiveness, all aiming to find ways to better understand why companies engage in greenwashing and how to potentially tackle the systemic use of greenwashing in employer branding.

It is a common held belief that green companies attract more talents (Albinger & Freeman, 2000; Barrera-Martinez, López-Fernández, Márquez-Moreno, & Romero-Fernández, 2015; Greening & Turban, 2000; Jones et al., 2014; Tsai et al., 2014) and that explicitly communicating an interest in environmental issues creates a more favorable image than entirely neglecting the topic (De Jong, Harkink, & Barth, 2018). Our research challenges these assumptions. We propose that the effects are more complex than previously reported (e.g. by Greening & Turban, 2000; Turban & Greening, 1997). In fact, our study contradicts De Jong and colleagues' (2018) claims of greenwashing being a "myopic strategy" (p. 108) due to its ineffectiveness in influencing purchasing interests.

We believed that further research was needed to understand what additional factors influence the translation of organizational attraction to job pursuit intentions and, perhaps even more importantly, its limitations and adverse effects. By specifically manipulating the authenticity of marketers and strategically employing deceptive marketing techniques, we uncovered the limitations and boundaries of green marketing that are often neglected in the above-mentioned studies. To the best of our knowledge, we are among the first to examine the effects of greenwashing in talent attraction.

Theoretical Implications

In keeping with calls for a more sociocultural approach to understand the adverse effects of green marketing (see e.g., Willness & Jones, 2013), the current work directly tests how the effects of green advertising and corporations' environmental identities impact job seekers' willingness to apply for a job. Overall, findings indicate that green recruiting messages have different effects on job pursuit intentions depending on the perceived organizational identity, environmental attitude, and organizational fit.

We confirmed our primary research goal by detecting an interaction between marketing and perceived identity on job appeal. When employers are considered as having a genuine interest in promoting sustainable practices, the communication on green policies makes them more attractive for prospective employees (Backhaus et al., 2002). This is consistent with research on consumer preferences, which has demonstrated that the success of environmental advertising is dependent on both the company identity and marketing efforts (Follows and Jobber, 2000). Additionally, this finding is in line with several studies on the effects of green cues (Atkinson & Kim, 2015; Parguel, Benoit-Moreau, & Russell, 2015; Spack, Board, Crighton, Kostka, & Ivory, 2012) and, therefore, adds to signaling theory. When exposed to limited information about an employer, job seekers actively search for cues to complete the company image. Our use of fictitious companies showed that recruiting advertisements are an important source of information and that job seekers are actively looking for green signals when evaluating an organization, especially if an organization is not particularly well-known (Breaugh & Starke, 2000; Kulik & Roberson, 2008; Rynes, Bretz Jr, & Gerhart, 1991). Lastly, the significant three-way interaction demonstrates that applicants' interpretation of a job advertisement is even stronger when the company's green identity correlates with the job seekers' environmental attitude (Grier & Brumbaugh, 1999; Mick & Buhl, 1992; Williamson, Slay, Shapiro, & Shivers-Blackwell, 2008) and, therefore, hints towards positive influencing factors that can amplify the effect.

The benefits of this favorable image may explain the wide use of green messages in advertising since the 1960s (Easterling et al., 1996). Interestingly, however, this use does not always translate into favorable candidate impressions. In fact, job seekers become increasingly skeptical of environmental claims made by some of these organizations (Skarmeas & Leonidou, 2013). Our studies demonstrate that green marketing can also have negative effects on the perceived reputation of organizations and, in turn, harms their attractiveness to job seekers. Across all studies, the lowest attraction scores were found in the non-green company and green advertising conditions, indicating that candidates attribute a negative appraisal towards their prospective employer when firms are not "doing what they preach" (Nyilasy et al., 2014).

In Study 4, we were primarily interested in testing whether the ability to detect greenwashing can be reduced. We showed that participants with high P-O fit positively react to green messages, regardless of their authenticity. This result is particularly interesting since green advertising is often considered risky (Nyilasy et al., 2014; Torelli et al., 2020) and potentially harmful (Newell, Goldsmith, & Banzhaf, 1998; Vanhamme & Grobben, 2009; Webb & Mohr, 1998), which may discourage companies to employ such strategies. However, we can again conclude that for job seekers with high identification with the organization, green signals appear to play a subordinate role. In other words, adding a green message in a company's job ad can increase job attraction, even for non-green companies, as long as the P-O fit is high. Revealing a potential benefit of using green marketing is an important amendment to most research suggesting that greenwashing has primarily negative consequences (Chen & Chang, 2013; Chen et al., 2014; Parguel et al., 2011). This result might also explain the widespread use of greenwashing by organizations. Understanding when greenwashing can have positive effects on talent attraction is key to building a more nuanced knowledge of why it is still widely used (Nyilasy et al., 2014) and how to effectively detect and combat deceitful organizations.

In conclusion, we are making several contributions to the literature on personnel psychology: First, we expand previous findings in greenwashing to the domain of employer branding and green recruiting. In fact, we specifically build our research on the idea that choice of employer

is a deliberate decision-making process that depends on a number of influencing factors and their interactions (Branham, 2005; Ganzach, Pazy, Ohayun, & Brainin, 2002). Compared to the other greenwashing experiments (De Jong et al., 2018; Nyilasy et al., 2014; Parguel et al., 2011) that mainly investigate short-term and, thus, less significant purchasing decisions, we specifically add to greenwashing literature by focusing on meaningful, long-term decisions. Moreover, our research is the first to incorporate the notion of inauthentic green employer branding in job advertising and, in doing so, provides a new theoretical perspective for how job seekers' organizational image perceptions are formed and modified. Looking more closely into the relationship between identity and marketing indicates that green marketing can be seen as both beneficial and harmful depending on the perceived identity. Lastly, by conducting an experimental study of actual job applicants, we were able to assess the causal effects of green marketing on perceptions of green identity.

Practical Implications

Our findings suggest that organizations would be well served to carefully consider their perceived green identity before promoting sustainable practices. We showed that job seekers can correctly evaluate the extent of truthfulness or deception in green job advertising. Providing misleading information about an organization's green values in its recruitment ads has strong negative effects on applicant attraction. Yet, despite being intimidated by potential skepticism or scrutiny associated with promoting green policies, company owners should not avoid green marketing per se. Organizations with genuine green identities should incorporate green messages into recruitment campaigns as green identity and marketing interact to increase the number of job applicants. Our findings are in line with Aiman-Smith et al. (2001) who inferred that employers with good pro-environmental policies could advertise them as a method of attracting talents and that individual talent values might have a moderating impact. Since job seekers build their employer perception based on signals in job ads, green advertisement could be a good area to start. Ultimately, it is important to note that that environmental values might not be the most important factor in the choice of employer, as shown by Study 4. As long as the organization fit between candidate and employer is high enough from a job seeker's perspective, talents might disregard environmental communication.

Limitations and Future Research

Our studies are subject to several limitations that suggest directions for future research. All studies investigated fictitious organizations, which helped us to control for confounding variables such as predispositions towards brands. We further modeled the ads as closely as possible on actual, real-life companies (such as Patagonia Inc., Exxon Mobil, and Shell). Nevertheless, not using real companies limits the applicability of our results. We believe that artificial ads are appropriate to study given the exploitative nature of our research yet recommend future studies to use our experimental framework among well-known employers. Moreover, in our second pilot study (Study 2) we found that not all industries result in strong differences. We, therefore, limited our results to selected industries. Future research should extend our studies by examining a wider set of company types. Lastly, results of Study 4 hint that other factors might also influence the effects of greenwashing on job pursuit intentions. As mentioned before, job decisions depend on a variety of factors. Accordingly, we need more research to detect additional moderating variables on the effect of greenwashing. We, thus, encourage future research to examine factors such as personality traits and perhaps also vary the organizational offers, such as salary, career prospects, and job responsibilities, in their

impact on disingenuous green employer branding.

Conclusion

In summation, our findings present a more nuanced view on both the positive and negative ramifications of greenwashing that go beyond what is mostly examined in consumer behavior. Environmental communication in human resources becomes an increasingly important global issue, which calls for researchers to widen their views and welcome sustainability research into their agenda. Our results showcase that a firm's perceived green performance can either enhance or damage its reputation depending on whether the firm's sustainability claims are considered genuine or misleading. The negative effects of providing misleading information are found to have significant impact on job pursuit intentions and help both researchers and practitioners to better understand greenwashing practices in the recruitment domain. Without a profound understanding of green marketing across domains, disingenuous green communication will continue to constitute severe ethical and societal harms and hurt all corporations in the long run.

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