

A Critical Analysis of Greenwashing Claims

Tiffany Derville Gallicano, Ph.D.

The number of companies issuing green claims over the last several years has increased dramatically as consumers and companies are paying more attention to their environmental footprint. Repeatedly, corporations are accused of greenwashing on websites that house such forums. The purpose of this paper is to begin to evaluate the fairness of the critical public's greenwashing accusations through a study of environmental criticisms against a company. This paper presents the first comprehensive framework for evaluating whether organizations are engaging in greenwashing, which can be useful to both scholars and professional communicators. Recommendations for studies about greenwashing are also presented.

LITERATURE REVIEW

On Earth Day 1990, millions of people joined together around the country to protest the rapidly declining health of our planet, forcing corporations to realize that even the average Joe had started to take an interest in the well-being of the environment. Predictably, the level of "greenwashing" has spiked sharply since that eventful Earth Day. (Deen, 2002, para. 1)

Greenwashing is "the act of misleading consumers regarding the environmental practices of a company or the environmental benefits of a product or service" (Greenpeace, n.d.). The term *greenwashing* developed as people identified inconsistencies between companies' actual behavior and claims about being green. Perhaps due to heightened attention to the issue in the past few years, the number of products that avoid greenwashing according to TerraChoice's (2010) standards appears to have increased by about 3.5% between 2007 and 2010. A critical group of people (referred to in this study as the "critical public") has identified greenwashing examples and has shared critiques through YouTube, blogs, and websites that focus on recognizing and stopping greenwashing.

Various guidelines exist for identifying greenwashing in organizations' promotional campaigns. Organizations that have produced greenwashing criteria include Greenpeace (n.d.), EnviroMedia Social Marketing and the University of Oregon (2009), TerraChoice Environmental Marketing (2009), and the Committee of Advertising Practice (2009). The first two of these organizations provide space for the critical public to accuse organizations of greenwashing and express opinions about whether greenwashing has occurred and why. The reviews and rankings posted to these websites are based on the perceptions of the critical public. This raises the question of how the critical public's perceptions would differ from the assessments of an independent party. How fair are the critical public's accusations? This study

acknowledges that answering this question is a matter of opinion. Nevertheless, it is useful to discover the extent to which an independent researcher agrees with the environmental criticisms that the critical public has made.

This study of Starbucks Corporation involves an examination of its sustainability record, its green claims, blog posts, comments by the critical public, and the organization's response to online criticisms. A framework for assessing greenwashing claims was created for this study by integrating greenwashing frameworks from four organizations (see appendix). This study is significant because it is the first academic study to present an integrated framework for assessing greenwashing claims and because it is the first academic study to interrogate the fairness of environmental criticisms based on independent research.

Corporations are powerful enough to influence legislation and get away with questionable business practices that benefit them (Kim & Dutta, 2009; Munshi & Kurian, 2005; Rampton & Stauber, 2002). However, there are also businesses that understand that their success depends on good relationships with internal and external stakeholders (Toth, 2007). Stakeholders' views of corporations may fall somewhere along a spectrum spanning from the belief that corporations tend to be deceitful (getting away with socially detrimental practices while spinning a different story for the public) (e.g., Kim & Dutta, 2009; Rampton & Stauber, 2002) to the belief that successful corporations tend to be built on meaningful relationships (openness, honesty, and transparency) (e.g., Grunig, 1992; Toth, 2007). Underlying views about the nature of businesses can influence people's beliefs about whether companies engage in greenwashing.

The notion of greenwashing was born from a critical view of companies' environmental responsibility and focuses on why the public should be skeptical of companies' green claims. The term was coined in the 1980s by Jay Westerveld who saw the inconsistency in hotels that didn't have recycling programs but encouraged the reuse of towels (Romero, 2008). Westerveld accused hotels of making false claims about being environmentally responsible because hotels only adopted environmentally responsible practices that would reduce costs.

The concern that environmentally friendly practices are motivated by saving money rather than by saving the environment persists today (Bivins, 2009; Laufer, 2003). Melillo, Miller, and Solman (2006) explained, "No matter how genuinely concerned these companies might be, it's unlikely they'd be pursuing this angle if there weren't profit to be had." In attempt to counter this perspective, some companies donate profits from conservation efforts to charity. For example, several hotels have signs that tell guests that money saved from reusing towels will be donated to charity (personal communication with Stuart Levy, assistant professor from George Washington University's Department of Tourism & Hospitality Management in the School of Business, June 10, 2009). It is still possible that the critical public would also discount charitable effort as being solely motivated by profit.

Organizations have been able to portray themselves as environmental stewards because consumers have limited information regarding organizations' operations and their sustainable business practices (Lyon, 2006). Critics are concerned that behind the splashy campaigns, little is actually being done to protect the environment (Bivins, 2009). Even independently published information is influenced by the quotes, statistics, and other information a company provides to a journalist (Herman & Chomsky, 2002). Notably, however, journalists have suggested that news provided by companies is infrequently used and when it is used, it is subjected to significant scrutiny or it is confined to special sections, features, and signed columns (Curtin, 1999). Curtin noted that shoestring news operations in her study relied more heavily on public relations sources. Given the date of the study and given the plummeting budgets of news organizations, this is an important caveat.

In many cases, consumers have lacked power when they act as individuals (Kim & Dutta, 2009). With today's technology, however, individuals can use new media to collectively voice questions and complaints (Stephens & Malone, 2009), which can disrupt the predominant one-way communication landscape that Cheney and Dionisopolous lamented in 1989. Wright and Hinson (2008) surveyed 328 public relations practitioners and noted "a recurring suggestion that... social media have had a huge impact moving public relations into the direction of facilitating more two-way communication by opening up direct channels of communications between organizations and their publics" (p. 19). Nevertheless, there is still substantial room for improvement as organizations learn to use online tools for two-way communication (Gomez & Chalmeta, 2011; McCorkindale, 2010).

Consumers are becoming increasingly aware of corporate social responsibility and are expecting more information and disclosure from companies. The information technology age has had a profound impact on the flow of information. The control of information resides with individuals rather than companies (Li & Bernoff, 2008). Customers have the power of social networking at their fingertips, which can be more influential and potent to a business than its competitors (Rainey, 2008).

According to Rawlins (2009), companies have three obligations to be transparent. First, companies must present accurate, substantial, and useful information. Second, companies must listen to stakeholders to discover the information they need. Third, companies must provide objective, balanced information about their activities and policies.

With regard to Rawlins' (2009) guidelines, it is essential that organizations provide ways for consumers to verify the accuracy of environmental claims (Vos, 2009; Ramus & Montiel, 2005). Some experts also recommend that organizations disclose quantitative measures of air emissions, water pollution, hazardous waste disposal, energy consumption, and greenhouse gas emissions (Etsy & Winston, 2006). Rawlins also stated that companies must meet the standard of *substantial completeness*, a term originally conceptualized by Klaidman and Beauchamp (1987). According to this standard, "a reasonable person's requirements for information are satisfied" (Rawlins,

2009, p. 74). Rawlins added, “The key to obtaining substantial completeness is knowing what your audience needs to know” (p. 74).

In a quest for information, consumers look for authenticity in companies’ marketing and environmental claims. As more companies have adopted green campaigns, “consumers are growing increasingly confused over what it means to be ‘green’” (Melillo et al., 2006). It is not just the consumers who are confused; branding experts are finding it difficult to issue green marketing because of the public outcry over greenwashing (Melillo et al., 2006). “This lack of connection between what companies are doing and how they are perceived threatens to weaken relationships between brands and consumers,” commented Kanter (2009).

It is apparent that the overuse of green marketing campaigns has created confusion for both consumers and companies. It is “impossible to judge how significant the disconnect is between public statements of compliance or social responsibility and a firm’s genuine efforts – particularly without external third party verification and monitoring” (Laufer, 2003, p. 257). Websites that host greenwashing accusations amplify the issue when they are not refereed by an independent party. Complicating the confusion about the veracity of greenwashing claims is the fact that no standards exist regarding corporate social responsibility (CSR) reporting formats or auditing requirements (Laufer, 2003).

It is important to investigate the fairness of environmental criticisms, as well as the rationale the critical public uses to criticize companies that brand themselves as environmentally friendly. No studies could be found that analyzed the critical public’s accusations of greenwashing. It is also important to discover and analyze how organizations engage with publics online regarding environmental criticisms (Bortree, 2011). To begin to understand these issues, this study focuses on all greenwashing claims that have been made against Starbucks on a website dedicated to greenwashing claims by EnviroMedia Social Marketing and the University of Oregon (2009). The following questions were investigated:

RQ 1: What types of justifications do the critical public use when criticizing Starbucks (e.g., research and facts, the company’s reputation, their own deep-seated beliefs regarding the company or industry)?

RQ 2: How fair is the critical public’s criticism in the case chosen for this study?

RQ 3: How does Starbucks engage with publics online regarding the environmental criticisms that are examined in this study?

METHOD

The case of Starbucks was chosen for this study because it is a large public company that has made a commitment to corporate social responsibility but has also received a

fair amount of criticism. It was also chosen because it is an organization with a strong online presence. A search for “Starbucks” was conducted on the two websites that are dedicated places for the critical public to make greenwashing accusations. Greenpeace (n.d.) had no greenwashing accusations against Starbucks; however, five communication efforts about Starbucks were analyzed on the greenwashing website by EnviroMedia Social Marketing and the University of Oregon (2009).

For each of the five communication efforts, all comments posted to the greenwashing website were examined. If the criticized communication effort was a video, it was also located on YouTube, and all comments on the particular YouTube Web page were analyzed. Finally, the name of each of the five Starbucks campaigns was typed into Google, and all blog posts that were found within the first 10 results were analyzed, including each blog post’s comments and trackbacks. A trackback is a link that appears on a blog post to another blog post that links to it. All of this content was used to answer the first research question about the type of justification the critical public uses when criticizing Starbucks. This search resulted in an analysis of 144 pieces of audience communication about the five criticized communication efforts regarding Starbucks.

For the second research question about the fairness of the criticism, the five Starbucks communication efforts that the critical public had analyzed were examined, in addition to the critical public’s reactions, which were based on the data collected for the first research question. In some cases, more needed to be learned about a critical public’s objection. In these cases, key words from the criticism were entered into Google and all documents within the first two pages of Google results were examined. The information that was found was also included in the discussion about the fairness of the criticism.

In addition, Starbucks’ online information about its operations was examined, including its CSR reports. To aid in the research, a comprehensive greenwashing framework was developed to compare and contrast the critical public’s environmental criticisms with Starbucks’ online information and CSR reports (see appendix). The greenwashing framework integrates the greenwashing criteria from the following organizations: Greenpeace (n.d.), EnviroMedia Social Marketing and University of Oregon (2009), TerraChoice Environmental Marketing (2009), and the Committee of Advertising Practice (2009). For each of the five Starbucks communication efforts, an analysis was conducted of each type of greenwashing criticism that a critical public mentioned. In the results section, the fairness of one of the critical public’s comments is highlighted from each type of criticism for each Starbucks communication effort. In line with Rawlins’ (2009) discussion about the requirements for transparency, the burden of proof was placed on the company to provide evidence for the green claims it makes and to provide answers to people’s comments about needing information.

The third research question was about Starbucks’ engagement with publics online regarding the criticisms examined in this study. This research question was investigated by looking for online responses from Starbucks. In addition, information was gathered from a Starbucks presentation given at Edelman’s third annual New Media Academic Summit (see Wheeler, 2009).

Starbucks Overview

Starbucks (2011a), one of the world's most prominent coffee brands and retail outlets, was founded in 1971 in Seattle's Pike Place Market. The company's mission is "to inspire and nurture the human spirit – one person, one cup, and one neighborhood at a time." Starbucks operates in all 50 states and in 43 international countries for a total of nearly 17,000 company-operated or licensed stores. Due to its size and presence in the marketplace, activists have targeted the company for various issues such as fair trade, labor practices, genetically modified food, and greenwashing. Starbucks is a mature company that has developed values for business practices. For example, in addition to its corporate mission statement, Starbucks (2005) has the following environmental mission statement: "Starbucks is committed to a role of environmental leadership in all facets of our business" through commitments of:

- "Understanding environmental issues and sharing information with our partners
- Developing innovative and flexible solutions to bring about change
- Striving to buy, sell and use environmentally friendly products
- Recognizing that fiscal responsibility is essential to our environmental future
- Instilling environmental responsibility as a corporate value
- Measuring and monitoring our progress for each project
- Encouraging all partners to share in our mission"

RESULTS

Starbucks Shared Planet CSR Effort

The first communication effort is called Starbucks Shared Planet, which is a CSR effort based on "sourcing our coffee ethically, acting as good stewards of the environment, and being actively involved in our communities" (Starbucks, 2011b, para. 1).

One place the effort was announced was on My Starbucks Idea (2010), which is a website where customers can make suggestions to Starbucks and vote on each other's suggestions. Most online reactions that were examined in response to the Starbucks Shared Planet announcement were entirely positive. Of the responses by the critical public, most people genuinely applauded the effort and then either noted important work still to be done or made a jab about Starbucks' environmental impact. Only a handful of people were entirely negative. Nearly all criticisms were based on research and facts or the need for clear research and facts, and one criticism also considered Starbucks' reputation as a balancing factor against cynicism.

To judge the fairness of the criticisms, each one was inductively matched to a criterion found in the framework for analyzing greenwashing (see appendix). One criterion from the framework that was expressed was that "a product may be 'green' but distracts from the environmental impacts of the category." For example, after complimenting Starbucks for its Shared Planet initiative, a member of the critical public added:

I would like to remind you, however, that recycling is not going to be the ultimate answer to environmental sustainability. ... I would challenge Starbucks then to expand the goals of sustainability by attempting to reduce the number of cups and other disposable products given out to customers. (Liz, 2008, para. 1)

The commenter then acknowledged Starbucks' discount of 10 cents for bringing in a mug and said that up to 40 cents would be a more realistic incentive. People on other websites suggested that 10 percent of the drink price would be fair.

The request for Starbucks to expand its goals by trying to reduce the number of cups given out was unfair because this comment was made in response to Starbucks' blog post that included the goal to "have 25% of the cups used in our stores be reusable" by 2015 (Michelle, 2008). Clearly, Starbucks has a goal to reduce the number of cups given out, although Starbucks (2011a) has recognized that it needs to do more to reach its goal. Starbucks' (2011a) progress report highlights the goal to serve 25 percent of beverages made in the store in reusable cups by 2015 and states, "Although we served 6.4 million more beverages in reusable cups in 2010 than 2009, we will need considerable innovation and customer engagement to reach our 2015 goal" (p. 9). On the progress report, Starbucks labeled its reusable cups effort as "needs improvement" (p. 9). Thus, it seems like the 10 cent discount is inadequate at the moment, at least without additional efforts, so the general idea about doing a better job to reduce the number of cups that are used is valid, although the exact criticism is unfair.

Another category of complaints from the greenwashing framework that is relevant to the Starbucks Shared Planet effort is that "claims are poorly defined and misunderstood by consumers." Part of the Starbucks Shared Planet effort is a commitment to ethical sourcing. Starbucks purchases Fair Trade coffee, as well as coffee that meets its own C.A.F.E. standards. There was disagreement and confusion about the differences between Starbucks' C.A.F.E. standards and Fair Trade standards. For example, a member of the critical public commented, "What they don't discuss is how their Coffee and Farmer Equity (C.A.F.E.) standards compare to those of Fair Trade. C.A.F.E. accounts for nearly 6 times as many pounds as Starbucks will purchase through Fair Trade" (Jonat92, 2009, para. 1).

The commenter's exact complaint is unfair because Starbucks compares Fair Trade and C.A.F.E. standards in its 2005 CSR report (download available via Starbucks, 2011c). Nevertheless, Starbucks' comparison of these standards is broad. A chart in the CSR report describes the mission of Fair Trade as "sustainable development of disadvantaged small-holder farmers of democratically organized cooperatives" and describes the focus areas as "minimum price, social premium, labor and environmental standards" (Starbucks, 2011c, p. 20). The report refers to <http://www.fairtrade.net> for more information. In comparison, the CSR chart states that the mission of C.A.F.E. practices is to "ensure the sustainable production of high-quality coffee by addressing social, environmental and economic responsibility throughout the coffee supply chain" (Starbucks, 2011c, p. 20). The focus areas are described as "coffee quality, social,

environmental and economic responsibility” (Starbucks, 2011c, p. 20). The report refers to <http://www.scscertified.com/csrpurchasing/starbucks.html> for more information. Both websites that are listed as resources for more information provide complex information; consequently, it is difficult to directly compare the two standards by using these resources. A more detailed comparative analysis about the unique advantages and disadvantages of each system is needed because the certification systems are complex.

Starbucks explained why it doesn't buy more coffee that is Fair Trade certified. Cindy Hoots (2008) of the Global Responsibility department at Starbucks explained, “There are many, many small farmers who also deserve access, but who don't fit the Fair Trade criteria.” She then told the story of a farmer and explained that his family would not qualify for Fair Trade due to the size of the farm and due to the farm's decision to not participate in the cooperative. This blog post leaves out important differences among the certifications, although presenting the differences was not the purpose of the blog post.

To explore the general idea behind the commenter's criticism, a Google search was conducted with the following search terms: “C.A.F.E. standards compare Fair Trade.” The blog posts and comments that resulted from this search expressed confusion and disagreement over how C.A.F.E. standards and Fair Trade standards differ. For example, an author at change.org wrote, “I, myself, have trouble figuring out what these standards really entail, and Dean even points out that the standards ‘are pretty mysterious, and most Starbucks people will readily admit they don't fully understand them’” (Patriana, 2008). Patriana (2008) had Rodney North, a representative from a Fair Trade company, compare C.A.F.E. and Fair Trade standards on her blog post.

North explained that with C.A.F.E. standards, you don't know if the coffee in your bag was grown and traded in a particular way because Starbucks says that a percentage of its beans are purchased under C.A.F.E. standards but does not label the C.A.F.E. coffee bags separately (Patriana, 2008). Although this criticism is valid right now, Starbucks plans to have all of its coffee sourced through C.A.F.E. practices, Fair Trade, or another externally audited system by 2015 (Starbucks, 2011a). On the other hand, there are differences among these standards, so unless there is a specially labeled coffee, Starbucks customers won't know whether their coffee is ethically sourced through C.A.F.E., Fair Trade, or another system, and some customers could care about the differences. For example, [greenlagirl](http://greenlagirl.com) (2005) wrote

Almost all of CAFE practices are just ‘recommendations,’ not requirements. Compare that to the tough environmental standards REQUIRED for fair trade certification. ...I'm glad that Starbucks is at least taking steps toward these goals. But I'm really peeved at the misinformation that Starbucks spreads.

North also noted, “While I personally think that the C.A.F.E. system has actually motivated coffee growers to improve their practices it's hard to know due to the opacity of the C.A.F.E. system” (Patriana, 2008, para. 8). Similar to [greenlagirl's](http://greenlagirl.com) (2005

comment, North explained that C.A.F.E. is based on a point system “that makes most anything optional, so long as you score high in another area” (Patriana, 2008, para. 8). Fair trade, on the other hand, makes it clear that you either meet certain requirements or you don’t. An examination of the generic scorecard for C.A.F.E. reveals that there are seven zero tolerance criteria out of 210 criteria for C.A.F.E. standards (Scientific Certification Systems, 2011).

Other key differences identified by North include the “negligible” amount of credit given to growers by Starbucks, as compared to fulfillment of all requests from growers in advance for affordable credit through Equal Exchange (North’s Fair Trade employer); whether the source of the coffee is a small farmer cooperative; and the payment structure (Patriana, 2008). Whereas Fair Trade growers get a definite price if they meet fixed criteria, Starbucks has created a “virtuous competition” in which coffee growers compete to have the most C.A.F.E. points. Those with the most points are at the front of the line to sell to Starbucks. North pointed out that some growers could improve, but if they were not among the best, they would not get to sell to Starbucks, and their environmental and social efforts would not necessarily be economically rewarded. North criticizes Starbucks, explaining

Whereas Fair Trade importers are consciously committing to paying growers more to make social and environmental improvements possible, Starbucks has devised a way to, in essence, outsource that extra burden on the growers themselves. If they to sell to STBX they just need to dig deeper, or try harder, than the other growers, but they can’t count on a higher price for their coffee to offset these investments or efforts. (Patriana, 2008, para. 16)

With this argument, North accuses Starbucks of shifting the financial burden for greater environmental and social efforts to farmers.

These differences between C.A.F.E. standards and Fair Trade standards have been presented to demonstrate a comparison between Starbucks’ communication about the differences between the standards and what others have communicated about the differences between the standards. Although the environmental criticism about Starbucks not providing a comparison between its certification and the Fair Trade certification was found to be unfair because Starbucks addresses some of the differences, the general idea behind the criticism is valid. Starbucks does not provide an analysis of all of the important differences between the two systems.

A third category from the greenwashing framework that relates to this case is “environmental claims that cannot be proven by data or third party verification.” For example, a member of the critical public stated

It seems to me that [C.A.F.E. certification] is obviously their strategy to avoid using Fairtrade products. The Fairtrade Foundation monitors and guarantees the minimum ethical standards in all its schemes. But who is

gonna monitor Starbucks' Shared Planet? Starbucks itself? I can see a problem here. (Cristina, 2008)

This criticism is unfair because Starbucks (2011a) has widely publicized online that its C.A.F.E. certification is independently monitored, and the CSR reports that include this fact are also verified by an independent company.

Bring in a Tumbler 365 Days a Year Video

This video shows the text “last year” and a woman who displays Starbucks cups on a light brown wall. The words “365 cups” appear when she has placed the last cup on the wall. The video cuts to the woman raising a tumbler in her hand. The text on the screen says “This year:” and then the blank wall behind her shows that no cups will be used. The video then shows a close-up of the tumbler in the woman’s hand and the following text: “Bring in a tumbler. Save 10¢ and another paper cup every time.” At the end, a Starbucks Shared Planet logo appears at the bottom that includes the words “Starbucks Shared Planet. You and Starbucks. It’s bigger than coffee.”

An overwhelming number of responses to this video were positive. Many of the comments on the YouTube website were not relevant to this analysis; for example, they involved conversations to each other about what a tumbler is. Criticisms were focused on the need for Starbucks to only offer mugs rather than cups for in-store customers and the problem of wasting cups to create the advertisement. Thus, criticisms were based on requests for change and observations.

Additional research about the request to only offer mugs for in-store customers was conducted by entering “why doesn't Starbucks serve drinks in mugs?” into Google and examining the first two pages of results. There was a vibrant conversation about this topic in the search results. Below is one of the comments:

Starbucks could encourage customers to use the in-house washable cups, but they don't. Many years ago when I worked for Starbucks, we were expressly told by our SM in our store to not encourage the use of the cups and to keep them out of the visual line of sight for the customers coming in to order. Since promoting myself to customer, I've had partners and shifts look at me crazy when I *ask* to use an in-house, washable cup versus disposable paper. Starbucks as environmentally conscious/friendly, my a**. (all asterisks in original; HopkinsBella, 2007)

On the other hand, another employee wrote, “They are available. Secondly, most stores have them in plain sight on the bar. ...I cheerfully provide one if the customer asks for one” (Deusx, 2007). Without supporting data though, the claim that “most stores offer them in plain sight” is questionable. Other helpful comments were from Starbucks employees and spouses who complained about the amount of waste that occurs behind the Starbucks counter, such as the lack of effort to recycle “loads of gallon size plastic milk bottles” (Marie, 2011). The best category in the greenwashing framework to describe this line of criticism is that “the company promotes environmental efforts or

achievements, which could divert attention from its bigger environmental problems.” This line of criticism is valid because it is inauthentic for Starbucks stores to promote its concern for cup waste while not doing more to encourage the use of its free in-store cups. Consistent, visible placement of in-store cups, signage, and other communications to educate customers about this option are needed.

The second criticism of the tumbler advertisement was that cups were wasted to create the message. As pointed out by other people who responded to this criticism, one can see that the cups that appear in the video have already been used because stains can be seen on the outside of them. Thus, the criticism is unfair.

Green Umbrellas for a Green Cause Promotion

Another Starbucks communication that appears on the greenwashing website is the Green Umbrellas for a Green Cause promotion. One version of the promotion has the words “Starbucks Green Umbrellas. Stand for Something Greener,” along with a circular logo with an umbrella on the inside and the following words on the outside: “Green Umbrellas for a Green Cause.” An online summary of the promotion features the same logo and has the following additional words:

To benefit Global Green USA, some of your favorite celebrities are designing, painting and transforming Starbucks umbrellas into original works of art reflecting the theme “Be Green This Summer.” Umbrellas will be on auction beginning May 21, 2007. [Learn more.](#) (“Green Umbrellas,” 2007)

In addition, the green umbrellas promotion included a \$25,000 donation by Starbucks to Global Green USA, which is an organization that advocates solutions to global warming.

Most of the responses to this campaign were positive. The negative comments were based on direct or indirect observations. A member of the critical public wrote

I love to see the big guys like Starbucks making the move to be greener... now if only The Big Green Mermaid would use recyclable hot cups. While they are using cups with 10% post consumer material, their cups are not compostable or recyclable. A \$20,000 donation to Global Green is nice but let's put that into perspective. It's like you or me giving ten cents. I wish they would pay more than lip service to being green. (Shipley, 2007)

This criticism fits the following greenwashing criterion: “The company promotes environmental efforts or achievements, which could divert attention from its bigger environmental problems.” At the time this comment was made in 2007, it was arguably fair because of the problem with cups; however, the criticism would not be fair if it had been made today because of Starbucks’ (2011a) goal to “develop comprehensive recycling solutions for our paper and plastic cups by 2012.” Starbucks has already taken actions towards this goal, such as testing cup recycling in a New York pilot project.

Starbucks Seasons Video and Starbucks Cup Waste Video

These last two communications efforts related to Starbucks that were found on the greenwashing website are grouped together because they have an important similarity. Both videos were created as student projects, and members of the critical public mistakenly thought the videos were created by Starbucks. The descriptions of the videos on their original YouTube locations reveals that the videos were both student projects. As such, criticizing Starbucks for videos it did not create is unfair. The criticisms posted to the videos were based on a request for information and an observation about cup waste.

Starbucks' Response and Strategy

The final research question is about Starbucks' response to the environmental criticisms that were examined in this study. This research question refers to official responses by Starbucks spokespeople, as opposed to anonymous employees who frequently share their opinions on blog posts that discuss Starbucks. At Edelman's third annual New Media Academic Summit, Wheeler (2009), director of digital strategy for Starbucks, discussed Starbucks' online strategy for communicating with publics. She stated that Starbucks "is ready and actively engaged in conversation on any topic." She said that at the same time, Starbucks does not have the staff power to talk about every issue. Consequently, Starbucks looks for the "zeitgeist" of conversations about the company and responds. I asked Wheeler about why Starbucks had not responded to accusations on greenwashing sites. She pointed to her earlier statement about focusing on the zeitgeist of conversation due to staff power. She also noted that she read news about greenwashing via Twitter that day and that perhaps responses to greenwashing sites will be the next step in expanding Starbucks' communication with online publics. Wheeler said that Starbucks prioritizes the conversations that take place on Starbucks' dedicated site for conversation, titled My Starbucks Idea (2010).

The research in this study confirms Wheeler's (2009) description. Starbucks employees appear to synthesize a large volume of comments and write new blog posts in response to them on the My Starbucks Idea (2010) website (e.g., Hoots, 2008; Michelle, 2008). On occasion, Starbucks posts replies to people in the comments section of its blog. For example, Matthew Guiste (2008), director of global social media for Starbucks, wrote the following comment response on a blog post about Starbucks Shared Planet:

Thanks for the note, UrbanVoy. Been a hectic week and you found it before I could tell you about it! Yes, as a company we are very serious about this topic and I think you'll find the "sharp differences" become much less so over the coming months. :)

This comment was made in response to a regular commenter who was pleased with Starbucks' announcement about coffee bean sourcing.

DISCUSSION

Most reactions to Starbucks' efforts in this study were positive; even the critical public tended to applaud Starbucks' green initiatives while asking for more change, asking critical questions, or making a jab about Starbucks' environmental impact. When Starbucks was criticized, the arguments used were nearly always based on facts, observations, the need for more information, and requests for change, as opposed to deep-seated cynicism against corporate America.

The fairness of the critical public's accusations was mixed. In the cases highlighted in this study, most of the exact criticisms were technically unfair because they asked Starbucks to do things that Starbucks is already doing or criticized Starbucks for advertisements that were actually student projects. Nevertheless, the general line of criticism for a couple of the critical public's comments was valid. Interestingly, other people posting comments factually refuted two of the unfair criticisms. This demonstrates that other people making comments could save a company the need to factually correct accusations in some but not all cases. On the other hand, the public needs information from official sources, and critical readers cannot necessarily trust or hold other people accountable.

Starbucks only posted one comment in response to the discussions we examined, and this comment was posted in response to someone who was applauding the company's efforts. Starbucks' strategy is to focus on the zeitgeist of conversation. Based on the data in this study, when Starbucks addresses people's concerns, it tends to create a new blog post on the My Starbucks Idea (2010) website, as opposed to responding within the comments section of blog posts.

RECOMMENDATIONS

It's important to recognize the range of quality in the critical public's responses to a company's environmental communication. Members of the critical public should not necessarily be ignored. They have legitimate requests for information and requests for change, and some of them spread false information due to their own lack of research. In some cases, other people corrected false perceptions in the comments sections of blogs.

This study raises the question about when it is acceptable for an organization to not provide information about itself when outsiders have offered that information online. In some cases, Starbucks might not need to make a statement. For example, when a commenter explained to a member of the critical public that the cups in a Starbucks' video were used cups, Starbucks probably did not need to also make this point because it was easy for the critical public to watch the video again and directly observe the stained cups. In other cases, Starbucks might want to present information that others have provided online. For example, Starbucks did an excellent job of providing resources to an abundance of information online about C.A.F.E. certification and Fair Trade certification; however, there was room for improvement in making the comparison of these standards meaningful beyond broad characterizations. Other people online, however, presented insightful comparisons of these standards, so in a sense, the

information was available, but it was not available from the company's perspective. As a consequence, interested readers were left with only a critical description of how C.A.F.E. standards compare with Fair Trade standards. Qualitative audience research is needed to discover whether Rawlins' (2009) standard of substantial completeness is fulfilled if information is available online but not from the organization itself.

A drawback about just focusing on the zeitgeist of conversation on an organization's own website is the potential loss of deep listening. An organization can engage in deep listening by going beyond its own communication channels to listen to discussions about itself. Some of the most interesting comments on other websites were posted by employees who vigorously defended the organization or attacked it by revealing personal experiences. These comments suggested inconsistencies in Starbucks' practices and pointed to important areas of improvement. In addition to deep listening, an organization should ideally comment back to people regularly on its own online sites, as well as other sites that command significant conversation about the organization. Directly engaging people by responding in the comments sections of blogs is likely a more powerful relationship building strategy than only engaging people by writing fresh blog posts that were inspired by comments.

This discussion also relates to an ongoing conversation in the public relations literature about concern for publics who are not powerful enough to command an organization's attention. This concern was raised by critical scholars such as Karlberg (1996), Dozier and Lauzen (2000), and more recently, Kim and Dutta (2009). Even if many practitioners are using social media for symmetrical communication as suggested by Wright and Hinson's (2008) research, the question arises as to which publics practitioners are engaging in online symmetrical communication with – or better yet, who are they not talking with online? Starbucks engages in significant online efforts yet did not respond in the comments sections to any of the critical responses we reviewed. Bivins (1993) argued that public relations practitioners have an obligation to lessen confusion surrounding an organization and to present issues clearly for open debate by the public. Furthermore, it is to the company's advantage to substantiate its claims because in doing so, it rhetorically diminishes the grounds for complaints that the critical public has. C. M. Condit and D. M. Condit (1992) referred to this strategy as *incremental erosion*.

LIMITATIONS

This study is just one case that begins to illuminate the fairness of greenwashing accusations. This study is limited by the boundaries for the case that were selected. There is a great deal of discussion about Starbucks' CSR practices online; this study shows just one sample of this discussion and should not be used for purposes of generalization. Furthermore, the question of fairness is a matter of opinion, and others could legitimately have different judgments. To the extent that space would allow, verbatim comments and details of Starbucks' practices were included in the results section with the hope that readers can decide if they agree with this study's assessments about fairness or if they want to draw different conclusions.

A weakness with using Web-based sources for the information in this case study is the issue of accessibility. Although Internet accessibility is more robust today than during the early days of the Internet, there is still a portion of the population that is not connected to the Internet; therefore, they are not sharing their opinions and perspectives in online communities. This study was limited to an exploration of the opinions of online critical publics.

FUTURE RESEARCH

Additional research is needed about greenwashing. Some of the research questions that should be explored include the following:

- Under what conditions (if any) is it acceptable for companies to not provide detailed information that is available in other places online?
- Under what conditions should companies engage in green branding and under what conditions should companies avoid green claims?
- What meanings do various publics make of greenwashing accusations? How do they make their own judgments about greenwashing accusations? What influences the credibility of a greenwashing accusation?
- What are the effects of accusing an organization of greenwashing or witnessing an accusation of greenwashing on a public's behavior toward the organization?
- What are the critical public's reactions to attempts to ameliorate greenwashing accusations, such as hotels that donate money saved from reuse of towels to nonprofit organizations?

CONCLUSION

This study demonstrates how easy it is for a company to be criticized for promoting its environmental efforts according to the framework for analyzing greenwashing. Companies could show improvement with their environmental efforts, but they could still be accused of greenwashing if there is a perception that this green promotion distracts from their overall environmental impact. Starbucks is considered by many as a leader in corporate social responsibility and has provided an immense amount of information about its sustainable business practices on its website; however, there were still some legitimate criticisms about its environmental communication. Starbucks opens itself to such criticism because it has chosen to brand itself as environmentally friendly. This study can be used as an example for companies developing videos and Web content related to environmental stewardship. In particular, organizations can use the framework to help themselves avoid accusations. The framework for greenwashing can also be used by scholars for future studies about environmental criticism.

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Appendix: Framework for Analyzing Greenwashing

This integrated framework is based on synthesizing the frameworks of Committee of Advertising Practice (2008), Greenpeace (2009), EnviroMedia and the University of Oregon (2009) and TerraChoice (2009).

	THE CLAIM: Critical Public	THE RESPONSE: Company's Website and CSR Report
SKELETON IN THE CLOSET		
-The business is inherently dirty but touts environmental initiatives		
-The company promotes environmental efforts or achievements, which could divert attention from its bigger environmental problems		
THE RIGHT HAND ISN'T TALKING TO THE LEFT HAND		
-The company claims a product is green based on a few attributes without considering a full life cycle analysis		
-A product may be "green" but distracts from the environmental impacts of the product category		
MAGIC TRICKS		
-Environmental claims are made that cannot be proven by data or third party verification		
LARGER THAN LIFE		
-Environmental claims are overstated or exaggerated		
MAY I HAVE THE DEFINITION PLEASE		
-Claims are poorly defined and misunderstood by consumers (e.g., natural)		
-Claims contain confusing pseudo-scientific verbiage		
LAW AND ORDER		
-The company claims a product or activity is "green" even though there are laws either restricting or mandating such		
-The company promotes "green" initiatives while lobbying against environmental laws and regulations		
TRUTH OR FICTION		
-The company makes false claims		
-The company gives the impression of third party labels or endorsements, where none exist		
-The company fails to acknowledge that an informed debate exists		