Purposeful and intentional greenwashing in Higher Education

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This research

- HEIs are making commitments to greenhouse gas reduction and adopting sustainable practices with increasing vigour.

- But might progress be jeopardized by greenwashing?

- Research study which to help us to build understanding of how to avoid purposeful or unintentional greenwashing.

- Reporting on early data collection at the pilot stage of project

Greenwashing: Theoretical underpinning

Multi-faced phenomenon encompassing both **environmental and social issues**

Falsehood key: 'the discrepancy between '**responsible words' and 'irresponsible walks**' '. (Pizzetti, Gatti and Seele, 2021:23)

Negative consequences including reduced trust and brand reputation and increased online negative word-of-mouth (Jahadi and Acikdilli, 2009; Guo et al., 2018).

The **purposeful or unintentional disconnect** between sustainability-related practice and communication.

Purposeful greenwashing can be conceived as **opportunistic behaviour**, the deceitful pursuit of self-interest (Morgan and Hunt, 1994), violation of implicit or explicit promises (John, 1984, 279).

Purposeful Greenwashing

- Communication strategies and artefacts which **knowingly seek to misrepresent** practice.

- **Selective disclosure** of positive information with **manipulative** intents (Pizetti et al., 2021, 23).

Example: An HEI might highlight its move to electric vehicles and solar PV panels but omit to mention investments in fossil fuels

Unintentional Greenwashing

- Practices which do not **live up to the agreed claims** of an organisation; practice could be **uninformed, imprecise or lazy.**

- Communication could **unknowingly not fully represent** practice; may **place inappropriate emphasis.**

Example: Stories about sustainability-related live briefs which are accessible to few students yet imply broader engagement

Research aim and focus

To examine the nature, drivers and implications of greenwashing behaviours within HE

- Student-focused activity originating from the marketing and sustainability functions

- Reporting on early stage of pilot study to underpin future research study

- Value your feedback

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Pilot study

- Single HEI

- Research population: Marketing team; Sustainability team

- Research sample: Leader in each area – sustainability, corporate comms, recruitment, international, plus members of staff at lower level. Expert academic.

- Semi-structured interviews, via zoom

- Open questions: experiences of working in the area of sustainability; developing messaging around sustainability; challenges experienced. Greenwashing only explicitly introduced at end of the interview

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Participants

Participant role	Gender	Duration (min)
Sustainability Manager	F	40
Sustainability Officer	F	55
Head of Corporate Communication	F	100
Head of International Marketing	M	60
Head of Student Recruitment	F	54
Digital Manager	M	54
Digital Content Creator	M	52
UK Recruitment Manager	F	55
Copywriter	M	48
Academic expert; Climate Communication	F	34

Interviews limited to under 60 mins

But rich data

Initial data analysis

Sustainability and drivers of potential greenwashing; Characteristics of the marketing of sustainability; Messaging and activity.

Sustainability and drivers of potential greenwashing

Sustainability and challenges: Low salience; visibility; covid; challenging concepts; confusion.

Literacy and knowledge: Interest v literacy; distinction between teams; no training; 'doesn't click'; environment as focus; spirals of knowledge.

Ways of working: Patchy relationship; opportunity for more collaboration; knowledge v meaning and flair; missed opportunities; loss of control; call for sustainability communication expert.

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Characteristics of the marketing of sustainability

Responsibility; to explain; give choice; training

Honesty/transparency; accuracy: detail v big picture

Emotion: enthusiasm; courage; brave; care; guilt

Audience; interpretation; detail; usefulness; where do they go with this?

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Messages and activity

Activity: Recycling gateway to sustainability – but challenging; carbon reduction (CECAP); proactive approaches by marketing; prospectus; merchandising; international travel; sustainable procurement; carbon emissions of digital content.

Messaging: Parallel output; authenticity; visualization; detail; positive stories; hope; difficult stories to tell; over-simplification.

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Unintended greenwashing

- Little evidence of purposeful, opportunistic greenwashing

- But a sense that greenwashing is evident in the HE sector – normalized

- HE is a relatively safe space as doing good

- Not seeing the full picture - simplification

- Focus on light, happy stories about activity with low impact – **unknowingly; inappropriate emphasis**

*'Definitely some messages which have come out centrally and we have thought, oh no that's not at all what we meant, it's come out a bit wrong'.*

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Emerging argument

- Sense that greenwashing is evident in HE sector; purposeful greenwashing not happening here; little sense of opportunism (Morgan and Hunt 1994). However **unintended greenwashing might be evident** reflecting discrepency between responsible words and actions (Pizzetti et al. 2021): messaging and activity

- Drivers: **Ways of working** compounded by disconnect in **sustainability literacy**

- Process of marketing sustainability in HE **appears thoughtful** - responsibility; honesty; emotion; audience - resulting in avoidance of purposeful greenwashing.

- Implications: not clear – little reference to negative outcomes (Jahadi and Acikdilli, 2009; Guo et al., 2018)

To examine the nature, drivers and implications of greenwashing behaviours within HE
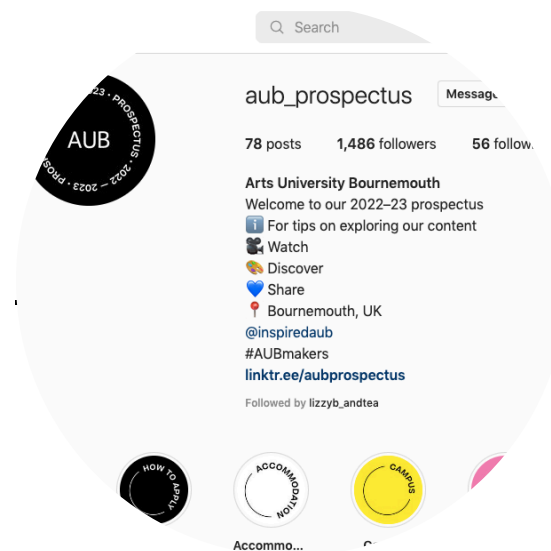
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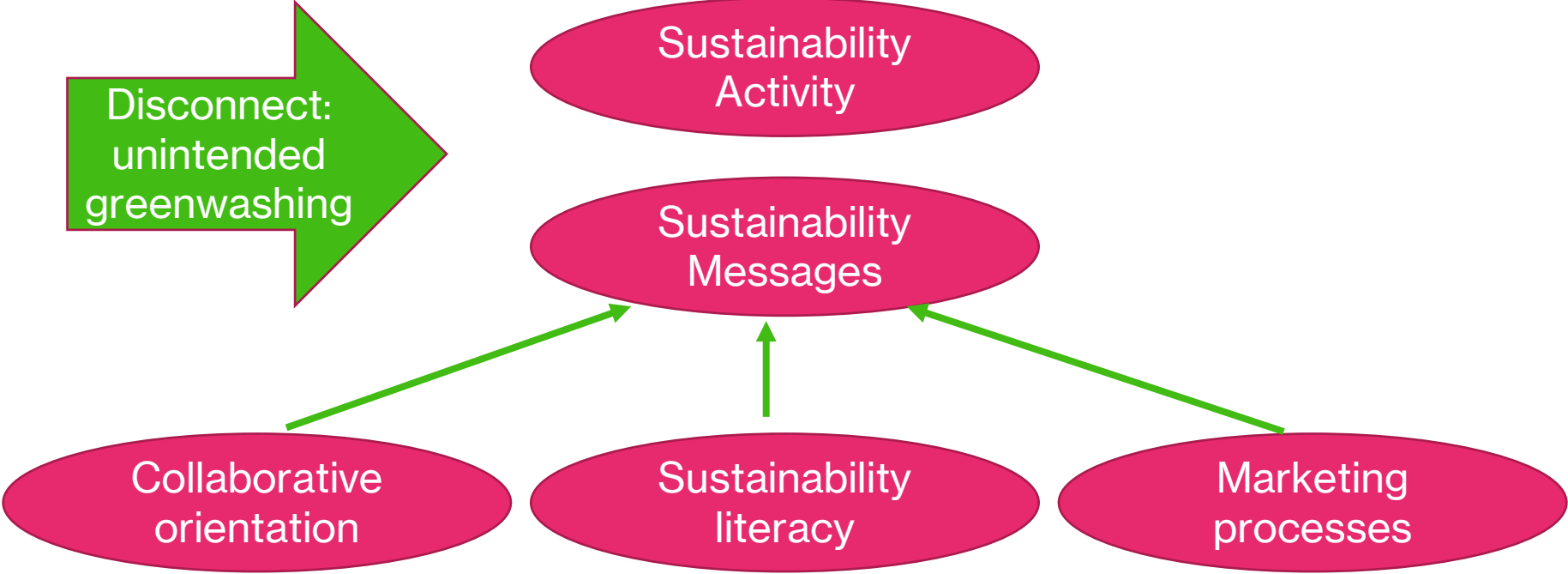
Unintended greenwashing

Sustainability focused communication which **unknowingly** misrepresents sustainability practice often placing emphasis on **low impact** or **small pockets of activity** and overly **simplifying** messages resulting inaccuracies in the representation of reality.

Reduced by **thoughtful marketing processes**, increased **sustainability literacy** and **enhanced collaboration** between marketing and sustainability teams.

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Emerging implications for practice

- Opportunities for experts in sustainability communication

- Prioritise training on sustainability literacy within marketing teams

- Code of practice on marketing and communicating sustainability in HE (address purposeful and unintended greenwashing)

- Produce a sustainability report with assured examples

- Impact is key, connecting – personal practice – professional practice – institutional practice.

- Be the change to inspire sector-wide change

Moving forward

- Greenwashing in HE appears to prompt interest and **energy to promote sustainability** in an authentic 'non-greenwashed' way – with genuine sense of **wanting to learn and improve** (ways of working; sustainability literacy);

- Multi HEI mixed methods project;

  Sustainability team, marketing team, academics, students

- Are you interested in getting involved? fjcownie@bournemouth.ac.uk

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Theme	Codes
Salience and challenges of sustainability	Huge challenge, grey areas, danger of defining sustainability, problematic term, recycling contaminated, tension, serious , normalization of greenwashing a great challenge, getting sector to work together on change, challenging concepts, mapping together elements of sustainability with SN simply and clearly – confusion re links and focus for organisation, Lack of salience, importance, visibility, signposting, gateway to sustainability , low level behaviours - nudge
Sustainability literacy and knowledge	No training, need for skills, understanding waste, understanding, learning, uncertainty, misuse of words, ability to explain, lack of confidence, problems re-occur, not clicked, increasingly literacy – more complete story, learning in interactions with team, eye opener, interest if not knowledge, understanding the bigger picture, understanding sustainability in whole (beyond env sustainability), value-add partner
Ways of working	Siloed, reactive, visibility, influence, consultative, pragmatic approach, proactive, large dept, difficult to change, discovering reality, learning, messy, different priorities, translation, loss of control, more mutual understanding, relationship, co-creation (not happening - goal), missed opportunities, priorities, benefit of seeing bigger picture – avoid instrumental churn, patchy relationship, value-add partner
Responsibility	Responsibility to explain, responsibility in thinking giving choices, responsibility for training, sustainability team given lots of responsibility to get things done. Responsibility to explain, responsibility in thinking giving choices, responsibility for training, sustainability team given lots of responsibility to get things done.
Honest/transparency/ accuracy	Not deliberately dishonest, increasingly open, accountability, seeing in different ways (sus and mktg), not opportunistic, trying to be honest, lack of space Checking nuances, details, abiding by rules, consumer protection, framework for checking

Theme	Codes
Emotions	Care, shame, enthusiasm, guilt, confidence, upsetting, enjoyment, fear, courage, conflict, excited, confusion, brave,
Audience	Interest, co-creation, zone off, unaware, where does the audience go with this? attacked, demotivated, barrier to action, complicity through desire for simplicity, audience interpretation can be misleading (eg recycling), increasing literacy – more complete story, feeling part of something, spike conscious interest, choice – linking individual and organizational choices, giving audiences choice (eg online content) for checking , value v waste
Messaging	Stretching messages, longevity, inauthentic, overclaiming, aspiring/inspiring stories, sense of balance, visualizing, comparisons, refining, detail, solutions, positive stories, big hitting stories, negative stories, over simplification, misrepresentation, importance of context, parallel output, serious, not lightly, lack of space, time, priorities, meaningful, choice – linking individual and organizational choices, nudging behaviours, some stories difficult to tell (eg SDG8) beyond headline
Activity	Recycled paper, merchandising portal, want big hitting stories, gimmicky, sustainable open day, accessibility, carbon emission from digital content, organic developments, sustainable procurement, embedded in practice, prospectus, merchandising,
Unintended greenwashing	Alertness, focus on light, smaller impact, happy stories greatest misalignment, focus on hope can be misguided given seriousness of challenge, not a lie, but can it be the full picture? Focus on progress v reality is misleading, target setting, normalized, getting good at it, great challenge, sense that sector overstating sustainability claims