

LEADERSHIP AS A SAFEGUARD AGAINST PURPOSE WASHING: A CONCEPTUAL MODEL

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Abstract: *The research is aimed to conceptualize and define purpose washing by developing a theoretical model through theory synthesis and systematic analysis, resulting in testable propositions on leadership intervention. A theoretical model has been created that outlines purpose washing, identifies its antecedents and consequences. This has conceptually been supported by leadership acting as a protective mechanism. Purpose washing is defined as the discrepancy between the communicated corporate purpose and organizational reality. Through the definition and systematization, the research gap has been closed. A theoretical connection between purpose washing and leadership has been established for the first time, resulting in four propositions related to sense giving, ethical, and responsible leadership as protection against purpose washing. This paper provides a conceptual basis for future empirical research on purpose washing and offers an initial practical direction for leaders.*

Keywords: *Purpose Washing; Corporate Purpose; Leadership; Corporate Hypocrisy; Responsible Leadership*

INTRODUCTION

In contemporary society, many issues are socio-political, and this trend extends to organizations. The corporate purpose is central within organizations, which define themselves not only by profit goals but by their core objective (Henderson, van den Steen, 2015, p. 327). In purpose-driven organizations, it becomes central to strategy and a key communication tool to ensure legitimacy and stakeholder trust (Pope, Wæraas, 2016, p. 177). Stakeholders expect organizations to act in line with their purpose and show a socio-political stance (Vredenburg et al., 2020, p. 445).

There is a growing discrepancy between a stated corporate purpose and its actual behavior, a phenomenon known as purpose washing. The construct is poorly researched until now, but as purpose communication increases, risks of discrepancy between claim and reality increase, similar to established concepts (Aisy et al., 2025, p. 50). Meanwhile, stakeholders become more critical, and counter-signaling due to perceived hypocrisy leads to serious consequences for organizations (Lewin, Warren, 2025, p. 420).

While greenwashing, woke washing, and rainbow washing are established, purpose washing is not yet clearly defined. The named constructs are theme-specific, while purpose washing is overarching as it relates to corporate identity. Thus, the scope of purpose washing is broader. A connection to leadership research is lacking. The aim is to define purpose washing as a construct. This will be deepened by anchoring its antecedents and consequences, developing a conceptual model. Finally, leadership intervention will be conceptually developed, outlining four propositions to support further research.

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

This research paper is conceived as a concept paper primarily exploring new relationships among the presented constructs (Jaakkola, 2020, p. 20). Purpose washing remains poorly defined and largely unexplored in qualitative research and fields like leadership.

This research uses theory synthesis and development to achieve conceptual integration of existing concepts, highlighting similarities to build coherence in fragmented research (Jaakkola, 2020, p. 21). The analogical derivation approach follows precedent in the washing literature. Vredenburg et. al. similarly derived woke washing by applying the decoupling logic of greenwashing (Delmas, Burbano, 2011, p. 65) to a new context (Vredenburg et al., 2020, p. 449). While research on corporate purpose is available, purpose washing has received little attention until now.

The theory synthesis involved three key methodological steps. Firstly, concept derivation extracted the dimensions of purpose washing by drawing parallels to established washing types such as greenwashing, woke washing, and rainbow washing. Secondly, the theoretical integration linked the antecedents and consequences of purpose washing to established models of corporate hypocrisy and stakeholder trust. A comprehensive framework was subsequently developed. Thirdly, propositions were formed based on existing research on sense giving, responsible, and ethical leadership. These propositions are essential for developing conceptual theory, as they increase the likelihood that subsequent studies will evaluate the argument's validity (Whetten, 1989, p. 492).

RESULTS

First, purpose washing is derived and established as a construct. Drawing on the literature on corporate hypocrisy and stakeholder trust, the antecedents and consequences of the construct are identified. Finally, the possibilities for leadership intervention are discussed and formulated as propositions.

Conceptualizing Purpose Washing

Washing phenomena is a growing research field where organizations claim societal values but often fail to implement them, revealing a gap between communication and action (Aisy et al., 2025, p. 37). Greenwashing was initially defined as the intersection of two organizational behaviors: poor environmental performance and, in parallel, positive communication about that performance (Delmas, Burbano, 2011, p. 65). While external stakeholders demand green products and services, organizations still need to be profitable, making competitive pressure the main driver for greenwashing (Delmas, Burbano, 2011, pp. 66–72).

Woke washing refers to the superficial promotion of progressive ideas without consistent support for them (Aisy et al., 2025, p. 50). Organizations with unclear social practice records try to appear socially engaged by decoupling communication from reality (Vredenburg et al., 2020, pp. 445–449). Consumers are the primary targets of woke washing, as the organization seeks to secure its legitimacy and respond to market pressures (Vredenburg et al., 2020, pp. 449, 451, 456).

Rainbow washing describes the support of LGBTQIA+ without true commitment (Aisy et al., 2025, p. 50). During Pride Month, logos turn rainbow-coloured, and collections emphasize Pride's profitability for organizations. The LGBTQIA+ community is a growing consumer segment, important to many organizations responding to social pressure in polarizing debates (Schopper et al., 2025, pp. 233–234). When an inconsistency between advertising and organizational reality is detected, and stakeholder attribute opportunistic, extrinsic motives, they assess the whole organization, causing disadvantages, boycotts or negative word-of-mouth (Schopper et al., 2025, pp. 236, 242–245).

Having introduced different washing phenomena individually, their shared dimensions will be systematically analyzed and subsequently summarized in Table 1. All phenomena describe a decoupling mechanism. There is a discrepancy between what an organization communicates and the organizational reality (Pope, Wæraas, 2016, p. 175). The decoupling mechanism was recognized in the initial greenwashing definition (Delmas, Burbano, 2011, p. 65) and picked up for woke and rainbow washing (Schopper et al., 2025, p. 243; Vredenburg et al., 2020, p. 449). Thus, discrepancy is the first shared attribute.

Washing occurs where stakeholders are deceived, mainly within organizational legitimacy to ensure actions align with social norms (Suchman, 1995, p. 574). It influences stakeholder behavior and perception, treating legitimacy as a resource and using communication to gain support but it can be undermined by decoupling (Suchman, 1995, pp. 575–578). All constructs target stakeholder groups as the main driver for washing, making stakeholder target the second attribute.

According to attribution theory, others' behavior is attributed to intrinsic or extrinsic motives, with washing perceptions occurring if extrinsic motives are attributed (Schopper et al., 2025, p. 236). The underlying motive is what distinguishes greenwashing from failure (Pope, Wæraas, 2016, p. 178). Washing assumes the organization does everything for benefits, with the decoupling of communication from reality, proving it is a conscious choice (Pope, Wæraas, 2016, pp. 178, 182), resulting in the underlying motive as the third attribute.

These three dimensions, discrepancy, stakeholder target, and underlying motive, are used as analytical categories systematically applied to each construct in Table 1. From this, purpose washing is then derived as a fourth construct, following the same logical approach.

Table 1. Systematization of washing concepts and the development of purpose-driven washing

Construct	Domain	Discrepancy	Stakeholder Target	Underlying Motive
Greenwashing	Environment	Gap between environmental claims and actual performance, selective disclosure of positive information while withholding negative (Delmas, Burbano, 2011, p. 65)	Consumers, investors, NGOs; response to external competitive pressure (Delmas, Burbano, 2011, p. 66)	Competitive pressure, legitimacy seeking, response to uncertain regulatory environment (Delmas, Burbano, 2011, p. 72)
Woke Washing	Social justice	Activist messaging detached from brand purpose and corporate practice (Vredenburg et al., 2020, p. 445); decoupling of communication from organizational reality (Vredenburg et al., 2020, p. 449)	Consumers (Millennials and Gen-Z) (Vredenburg et al., 2020, p. 456); broad sociopolitical communities, e.g. LGBTQIA+ (Vredenburg et al., 2020, p. 451)	Brand equity and reputation management (Vredenburg et al., 2020, p. 444); response to market pressure, not values-driven (Vredenburg et al., 2020, p. 449)
Rainbow Washing	LGBTQIA+ rights	Use of LGBTQ+ symbols in advertising without genuine support through policies (Schopper et al., 2025, p. 234); inconsistency between messaging and organizational actions (Schopper et al., 2025, p. 243)	LGBTQ+ community as vested stakeholders and fastest-growing consumer segment (Schopper et al., 2025, p. 234); consumers with high identity salience credit as the most critical group (Schopper et al., 2025, p. 243)	Profiting from the „queer dollar“ (Schopper et al., 2025, p. 234); responding to sociopolitical pressure (Schopper et al., 2025, p. 233); extrinsic, opportunistic motives (Schopper et al., 2025, p. 236)
Purpose Washing	Corporate identity	Gap between the communicated organizational purpose and the actual embedding in practices and decision-making	All stakeholder groups, particularly those evaluating alignment between purpose claims and organizational reality	Legitimacy seeking and stakeholder trust maintenance; strategic decoupling of purpose communication from organizational reality

Compared with the established constructs, purpose washing is generally broader in scope; corporate purpose is a superordinate concept and encompasses more than the other washing constructs. Henderson and van den Steen's simple defini-

tion of corporate purpose serves as a baseline for research, despite no universal definition. They defined corporate purpose as “a concrete goal or objective for the firm that reaches beyond profit maximization” (Henderson, van den Steen, 2015, p. 327).

The discrepancy arises from the gap between the communicated corporate purpose, measures, and practices, highlighting the contrast between purpose claims and organizational reality. Internal and external stakeholders, especially key ones like employees, are affected, mainly those assessing the alignment between claims and practices. Purpose washing is driven by the desire to build and sustain stakeholders’ trust, aligning with legitimizing the organization amid ongoing environmental challenges.

Antecedents and Consequences of Purpose Washing

Organizations develop policies to meet corporate social responsibility, but incidents of irresponsible behavior rise (Wagner et al., 2009, p. 77). If an organization fails this requirement, claims of corporate hypocrisy arise, believing it claims something it doesn’t truly uphold, due to inconsistent information on the communicated matter (Wagner et al., 2009, p. 79). The stakeholder thinks that perceived hypocrisy stems from a lack of motive, leading to negative views of the organization if malicious intent is suspected (Chen et al., 2020, p. 490).

Trust is a multidimensional key factor in the stakeholder-organization relationship (Pirson, Malhontra, p. 3). It refers to stakeholders’ willingness to show themselves vulnerable in the face of the organization’s actions (Schnackenberg, Tomlinson, 2016, p. 1799). Stakeholders’ focus varies: internal stakeholders seek proof of leadership, external stakeholders prioritize technical competence (Pirson, Malhontra, pp. 11–12). Perceived hypocrisy reduces stakeholder trust (Smith, Rhiney, 2020, p. 4).

Drawing on corporate hypocrisy and stakeholder trust, four organizational-level antecedents and four corresponding consequences of purpose washing can be identified. Stakeholders pressure organizations to take stances on socio-political issues (Vredenburg et al., 2020, p. 445), which are not handled in daily operations. Securing organizational legitimacy is essential. Corporate purpose guides strategy and helps gain societal support and legitimacy (Suchman, 1995, p. 576), but this can lead to a loss of value orientation (Pope, Wæraas, 2016, p. 177). Reputation management uses corporate purpose to secure or boost reputation, with the main idea of the corporate purpose moving to the background (Lewin, Warren, 2025, p. 419). The decoupling mechanism precedes purpose washing. When communication disconnects from organizational reality, purpose lacks internal anchoring in structures and leadership (Pope, Wæraas, 2016, p. 182; Wagner et al., 2009, p. 79).

Purpose washing involves gaps between the corporate purpose and reality, affecting stakeholders and creating hypocrisy perceptions (Wagner et al., 2009, p. 83), which is connected to the erosion of stakeholder trust. Perceived hypocrisy is negatively linked to trust (Smith, Rhiney, 2020, p. 4), supporting this consequence of purpose washing. A stakeholder backlash is an expected consequence of pur-

pose washing. Extrinsic motives decrease stakeholder support, leading to boycotts (Schopper et al., 2025, p. 236) which is expected in the case of purpose washing. Finally, the loss of legitimacy stems from purpose washing. Organizational legitimacy can strongly support an organization but also endanger it if stakeholders perceive a discrepancy between communicated values and actual actions (Suchman, 1995, p. 578). Figure 1 consolidates these four antecedents and consequences into a conceptual model, showing how organizational conditions lead to purpose washing and the resulting stakeholder outcomes.

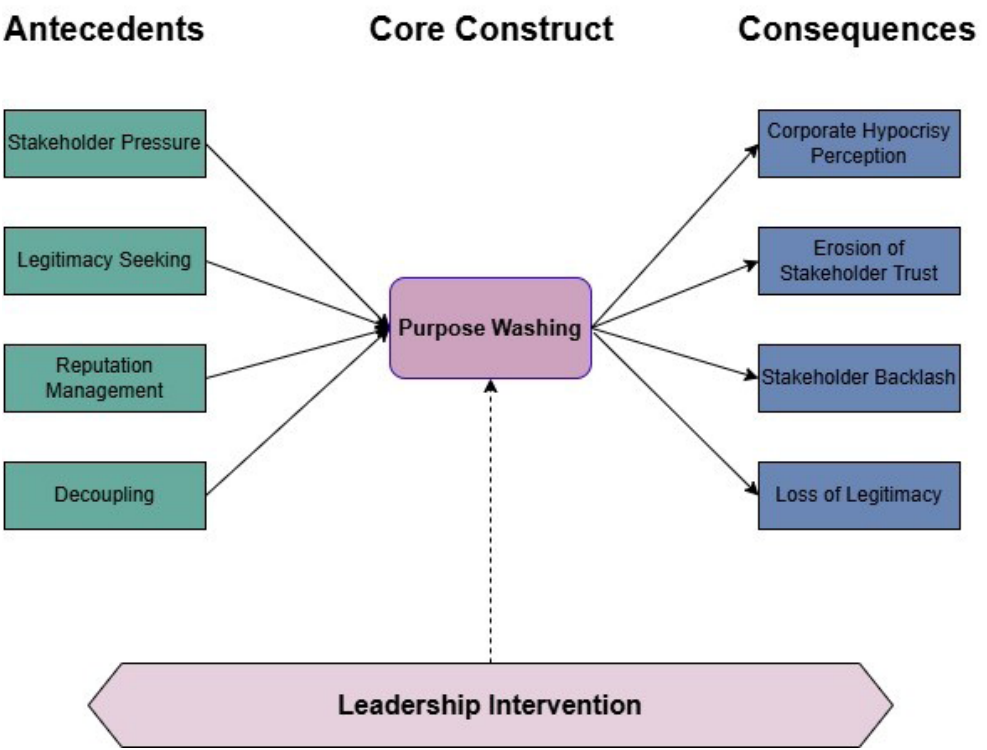


Figure 1. Conceptual Model of Purpose Washing: Antecedents, Consequences, and Leadership as a Safeguard Source: Own illustration

Leadership as Safeguard: Propositions

A leader establishes, communicates, and executes a corporate purpose to foster employee engagement. Based on research in sense giving, ethical, and responsible leadership, four propositions outline how leadership can prevent purpose washing.

The importance of leaders as sense givers has been highlighted, as shaping how people understand themselves and their work is a critical leadership task (Foldy et al., 2008, pp. 514–515). Every strategic change requires shifting thinking to seize op-

portunities or respond to environmental changes. Success depends on all members understanding this, with sense making and sense giving clarifying the vision (Gioia, Chittipeddi, 1991, p. 434). Sense making involves creating a meaningful framework to understand the nature of the intended change (Gioia, Chittipeddi, 1991, p. 442). Sense giving shapes how others interpret and reshape the organization's reality in the way that is preferred (Gioia, Chittipeddi, 1991, p. 442).

Purpose washing involves stating a corporate purpose without backing it up with action. Leaders, as sense givers, influence opinions to reshape organizational reality. They can actively shape and implement the corporate purpose. The first proposition is: The stronger and more effective leaders are in their role as sense givers, the less likely purpose washing is to occur within the organization.

Leadership ethics benefits from discussing organizational responsibility and corporate purpose (Voegtlin et al., 2012, p. 3). In globalization, leaders must balance social, financial goals and uphold legitimacy (Voegtlin et al., 2012, p. 6). In ethical leadership, leaders must cultivate ethical behavior to manage their businesses responsibly (Baba, 2014, p. 157). Ethical leadership can guide appropriate behavior, such as corporate purpose, through interpersonal relationships, personal actions, reinforcement, and shared decision-making (Baba, 2014, p. 157). Thus, it might prevent purpose washing if practiced correctly. Proposition two is: Ethical leadership reduces the likelihood of purpose washing through internal accountability and alignment between the communicated purpose and organizational behavior.

Responsible leadership can serve as a normative orientation for globally engaged leaders (Voegtlin et al., 2012, p. 7). It involves being aware of how one's actions affect all stakeholders and proactively engaging in dialogue with them (Voegtlin et al., 2012, p. 8). Responsible leaders should promote public engagement with stakeholders and use it as a foundation for developing organizational communication (Voegtlin et al., 2012, p. 8). Leaders must possess the ability to recognize ethical issues during decision-making (Voegtlin et al., 2012, p. 8).

The washing constructs cited shared stakeholder pressure as the reason for their emergence. As responsible leadership stresses communication, relationship-building, and stakeholder involvement in the organization's decisions, it naturally helps counteract washing, especially purpose washing. Maintaining ongoing stakeholder dialogue prevents purpose washing. The third proposition is: Responsible leadership acts as a buffer in the relationship between stakeholder pressure and purpose washing.

Responsible leaders engage broadly with stakeholders, building personal relationships and generating trust in open communication (Schnackenberg, Tomlinson, 2016, p. 1799). Leaders must justify their actions to both internal and external stakeholders. They must honor their commitments, as any disconnect would quickly become evident. The fourth proposition is: Authentic leadership communication strengthens stakeholder trust and counteracts purpose washing.

DISCUSSION

Purpose washing was established as a new construct, filling a conceptual gap in the literature on washing. By systematically deriving the construct from existing research on greenwashing, rainbow washing and woke washing, this study demonstrates greater methodological rigour than the ad hoc definitions previously found in the literature. Two additional strands of literature, corporate hypocrisy and stakeholder trust, were integrated to explain the mechanisms of the construct. This has not previously been applied to purpose washing.

The conceptual contribution lies in establishing a link between purpose washing and leadership research, which did not previously exist and is conceptually anchored for the first time. In practical terms, this clarifies that leaders are the main figures in preventing purpose washing. Authentic communication functions as a practical tool, with leaders encouraged to incorporate sense giving and responsible leadership as specific strategies. Leaders should actively influence the definition of purpose and continuously communicate with stakeholders as responsible leaders. Sense giving occurs through various internal communication formats, like Town Hall Meetings, where the purpose is clearly connected to daily decisions. Responsible leadership can be implemented through structured dialogue platforms, such as stakeholder advisory boards, that create continuous communication channels with external stakeholders.

Despite its conceptual contribution, the framework is subject to certain limitations that future research should address. As this is a conceptual paper, the propositions have not been empirically tested. The focus has been on the organizational level, meaning that the individual and societal levels have been excluded so far. The leadership types have not been considered exhaustively.

It is advisable to test the propositions empirically. A qualitative case study would be conceivable to examine how purpose washing arises in practice and how leadership intervenes. Measurement tools for purpose washing should be developed. Another option is to analyse the contextual factors related to purpose.

CONCLUSION

In the preceding sections, purpose washing was derived as a new construct, theoretically grounded and conceptually developed with leadership as a safeguard. Drawing on leadership research, four propositions were formulated as a basis for future studies on how leadership intervenes in purpose washing. The paper makes a conceptual contribution to both the washing literature and leadership research.

As organizations increasingly communicate their corporate purpose to secure legitimacy and stakeholder trust, the risk of purpose washing is growing. This paper provides a conceptual model for understanding and addressing this phenomenon, with leadership emerging as a key intervening factor. Further research is needed to test the proposed model and advance our understanding of purpose washing in practice.

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ЛИДЕРСТВОТО КАТО ЗАЩИТА СРЕЩУ РАЗМИВАНЕТО НА ЦЕЛИТЕ: КОНЦЕПТУАЛЕН МОДЕЛ

Резюме: Целта на изследването е да се концептуализира и дефинира размиването на целите чрез разработване на теоретичен модел посредством синтез на теории и систематичен анализ, което да доведе до формулирането на тестваеми хипотези относно лидерската намеса. Създаден е теоретичен модел, който очертава размиването на целите, идентифицира неговите предикатори и последствия и е концептуално подкрепен от лидерството, действащо като защитен механизъм. Размиването на целите се дефинира като несъответствието между обявената корпоративна цел и организационната реалност. Чрез дефиницията и систематизацията е запълнена празнината в изследванията. За първи път е установена теоретична връзка между размиването на целите и лидерството, което довежда до четири предложения, свързани с придаването на смисъл, етичното и отговорното лидерство като защита срещу размиването на целите. Тази статия предоставя концептуална основа за бъдещи емпирични изследвания върху размиването на целите и предлага първоначална практическа насока за лидерите.

Ключови думи: размиване на целите; корпоративна цел; лидерство; корпоративна лицемерност; отговорно лидерство

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