Chapter 5
Greenwashing as a Corporate Communication Strategy in Tourism Companies

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ABSTRACT

In Smart Cities, tourism companies increasingly promote sustainability, but many engage in greenwashing, misleading communication that exaggerates environmental responsibility. This chapter analyzes how such practices affect consumer trust and purchasing decisions. Using a Case Study approach, this chapter reveals that greenwashing generates skepticism and harms corporate reputation, while transparency and verifiable sustainability claims foster consumer confidence. The chapter offers practical recommendations for ethical communication, highlights the role of regulation and consumer education, and suggests future research on loyalty and technological tools to verify sustainability efforts.

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INTRODUCTION

In recent decades, corporate communication has evolved significantly, becoming a key tool for managing reputation and stakeholder relationships. In the tourism sector, where sustainability has become a fundamental value, companies have implemented communication strategies aimed at demonstrating their commitment to the environment and sustainable development (Font & McCabe, 2017). However, in many cases, these strategies do not reflect actual actions but rather respond to a misleading practice known as greenwashing (Delmas & Burbano, 2011).

The growing environmental awareness among consumers has generated a demand for responsible tourism services, prompting companies to adapt their communication to highlight their commitment to sustainability (Dodds, Holmes, & Novotny, 2022). Nevertheless, some organizations have chosen to exaggerate or distort their environmental initiatives to improve their corporate image without making significant changes to their operations. This phenomenon of greenwashing presents both an ethical and economic dilemma, as it not only deceives consumers but can also generate distrust and harm the reputation of the tourism sector (Lyon & Montgomery, 2015).

Greenwashing is defined as the practice of presenting a false or exaggerated image of sustainability through communication strategies that do not correspond to actual actions (Bowen, 2014). In the tourism context, this strategy can manifest through weak environmental certifications, misleading advertising, or ambiguous claims about the ecological impact of their operations. A common example is the promotion of hotels that label themselves as "eco-friendly" without meeting strict sustainability standards, which confuses consumers and undermines genuine responsible tourism initiatives (Torelli, Balluchi & Lazzini, 2020).

From an economic perspective, greenwashing can generate short-term benefits by attracting customers who value sustainability. However, in the long run, it can damage the credibility of both the company and the sector in general. Ethically, this practice is questionable because it exploits consumers' goodwill and undermines trust in truly ecological initiatives. Moreover, greenwashing can hinder progress toward truly sustainable tourism by diverting attention and resources away from practices that generate real positive environmental impacts (Peattie & Crane, 2005).

The importance of this chapter lies in the need to analyze how tourism companies use greenwashing in their corporate communication and how this strategy affects consumers and the sector. Research in this area allows for the identification of greenwashing patterns and the development of strategies to foster more transparent and ethical communication in tourism (Font, Elgammal & Lamond, 2017). Through the analysis of practical cases, this chapter seeks to highlight the consequences of

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