

GREENWASHING AND BRAND TRUST: THE MEDIATING ROLE OF GREEN AWARENESS AMONG GENERATION Z CONSUMERS OF AQUA DANONE

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Abstract: Previous studies have explored the relationship between greenwashing and brand trust; however, limited research has investigated this relationship with green awareness as a mediating variable. This is particularly relevant among Generation Z consumers in Samarinda, Indonesia. An emerging urban area influenced by its proximity to Indonesia's new capital, Nusantara. This location presents a strategic opportunity to study the behavior of Generation Z consumers due to its growing economic activity and dynamic market in Indonesia. This study aims to fill this gap by focusing on a younger demographic that is highly aware of environmental issues but remains critical of corporate sustainability claims. This study aims to analyze the effect of greenwashing on brand trust through green awareness as a mediating variable among Generation Z consumers of AQUA Danone. Using a quantitative approach, survey data were collected from 100 Generation Z respondents and analyzed with Partial Least Squares-Structural Equation Modeling (PLS-SEM) using SmartPLS software. The results indicate that greenwashing had no effect on brand trust; however, green awareness significantly mediated the relationship between greenwashing and brand trust, indicating an indirect pathway that influences consumer perceptions. These results highlight the essential role of green awareness in transforming the potential negative impact of greenwashing into opportunities to build brand trust. Therefore, companies should focus on enhancing environmental education and ensuring transparency in their sustainability campaigns to foster stronger trust among Generation Z consumers.

Keywords: Greenwashing, Green Awareness, Brand Trust, Generation Z, SmartPLS

1. Introduction

Waste represents a significant global environmental challenge. Each year, millions of tons of waste accumulate, with the majority disposed of in landfills or contributing to pollution in oceans and ecosystems. The consequences of waste extend beyond environmental degradation to include adverse effects on human health and the survival of wildlife. The Ministry of Environment and Forestry (KLHK) estimates that Indonesia will generate 25,996,549 tons of waste in 2024, with plastic waste accounting for approximately 9,866,012 tons. According to research cited by Aisha (2023) and Lestari et al. (2019), plastic waste is a major problem because the most difficult plastic waste to decompose naturally takes up to hundreds of years to decompose due to its complex carbon composition (unbiodegradable).

Data from Ismawati (2023) vindicate that bottled water companies (AMDK) are significant contributors to plastic waste due to their reliance on plastic bottles. AQUA, the most popular among Indonesians according to the 2024 Top Brand Award. This is illustrated in the following table 1:

Table 1. Top Brand Index (TBI) Bottled Water (AMDK) Category in 2024

Brand	Top Brand Index (TBI)
AQUA	46.90%
Le Minerale	18.80%
Ades	5.50%
Cleo	5.10%
Club	3.30%

Sources: topbrand-award.com, 2024

Table 1, which presents the Top Brand Index (TBI) for the Bottled Water Category in 2024, shows that AQUA ranks first with an index of 46.90%. AQUA has promoted the #BijakBerplastik campaign as part of its commitment to sustainability, launching the initiative on June 5, 2018 (AQUA, 2025). This cross-sectoral collaboration between Danone-AQUA is set to continue until 2025. The campaign has three primary objectives: leading a national recycling education campaign in 20 major Indonesian cities, collecting more plastic waste than the company produces in Indonesia, and ensuring that all AQUA plastic packaging is 100% recyclable by increasing the recycled plastic content in bottles by 50% by 2025 (Noer & Megan, 2020).

According to GreenPeace (2020), in 2019, the results were reversed, with plastic waste dominated by waste from fast-moving consumer goods, and AQUA becoming one of the three brands that contributed the most waste in Indonesia. Behind the #BijakBerplastik claim, allegations have surfaced that AQUA is engaging in greenwashing practices. Greenwashing is a marketing strategy or corporate activity that refers to presenting an environmentally friendly image, based on objectives, results of existing products, and corporate values, without actually carrying out activities that have a positive impact on the environment (Irawati et al., 2023). Greenwashing damages trust because consumers feel deceived by false claims.

Consumer trust is essential for sustaining customer loyalty. AQUA's continued presence in a competitive market is largely attributed to repeat purchases by loyal customers. Product quality significantly contributes to this high level of brand trust. Despite evidence of greenwashing, AQUA products remain in high demand due to consumer confidence in their quality. Previous research by More (2019) indicates that greenwashing does not significantly affect brand trust. In this study, green awareness plays a crucial role as a mediating variable in the relationship between greenwashing and brand trust. Consumers with high green awareness tend to be more skeptical of environmental claims made by companies and are more competent at recognizing greenwashing. Therefore, if consumers discover greenwashing, the negative impact on brand trust becomes more significant.

Green awareness is growing among the public, especially among Generation Z. They are the second youngest generation between millennials and Generation Alpha. The identity of Generation Z has been shaped by the digital era, which is why Generation Z is known as digital natives, the first generation to grow up with the internet (McKinsey & Company, 2024).

Narratively, this study attempts to examine the influence of greenwashing on brand trust through a process that involves consumer skepticism. Rather than directly damaging trust, when consumers encounter exaggerated or misleading green claims, they begin to pay attention and feel doubtful about these claims, which then leads to skepticism. This process can gradually reduce brand trust because consumers feel deceived or betrayed by a product.

In the context of this study, greenwashing does not directly damage brand trust, but rather, there is a cognitive process involving consumer attention and skepticism, which allows green awareness to strengthen consumer resilience to misleading claims and help protect brand trust.

Currently, there are only a few studies on greenwashing, and there is a research gap regarding greenwashing and its effect on brand trust, particularly in the context of bottled water companies in Indonesia. Moreover, limited research that uses green awareness as an intervening variable. This study is novel in that it combines these three variables into a single structural model and focuses on the Indonesian local brand AQUA.

2. Literature Review

Stimulus-Organism-Response Theory (SOR)

In marketing, the Stimulus-Organism-Response Theory is generally applied to provide an understanding of how consumers can respond to stimuli provided by companies through marketing activities. This theory categorizes marketing variables as stimuli, including advertisements, product design, promotions, and environmentally friendly campaigns that companies convey to consumers. These stimuli then influence the organism, specifically the psychological state of consumers, encompassing their perceptions, emotions, awareness, and individual attitudes toward the received information. After this internal process occurs, a response is finally created, namely, consumer reactions in the form of purchase intent, brand satisfaction, loyalty, and trust in a brand (Erul et al., 2024; Sugiarto et al., 2022).

Greenwashing

Parguel et al, in More (2019), Greenwashing refers to the practice of companies making exaggerated or unsubstantiated environmental claims regarding products or brands. This practice employs misleading green marketing strategies to create the perception that a product is environmentally friendly, which can have substantial negative consequences. Greenwashing can be measured using the following indicators: (Chen & Chang, 2013; More, 2019)

1. Products that use misleading language in environmental claims.
2. Products that employ misleading visuals or graphics in environmental claims.
3. Products that present vague or unsubstantiated environmental claims.
4. Products that overstate their environmental benefits.
5. Products that omit or obscure critical information to enhance the perceived validity of environmental claims.

Brand Trust

Brand trust is defined as the confidence that consumers place in a brand, even when potential risks are present. Maintaining a consistent record of meeting or exceeding expectations is crucial for fostering both trust and loyalty among consumers. Brand trust consists of two fundamental elements: reliability, which assures consumers that products will fulfill their promises, and intent, which reflects the perception that the brand prioritizes consumer interests. This trust is reinforced through positive experiences and meaningful interactions. A brand is considered trustworthy when it consistently fulfills its commitments throughout all stages of development, production, sales, service, and advertising, even under challenging conditions (Delgado-Ballester & Munuera-Aleman in (Pramezwar et al., 2021)). Brand Trust can be measured using the following indicators: (Wadi et al, in (Sari et al., 2021))

1. Credibility of the brand
2. Competence of the brand
3. Benevolence of the brand
4. Reputation of the brand

Green Awareness

According to Utami et al., (2024) Green awareness refers to consumers' recognition of products that are recyclable, environmentally friendly, non-toxic, and manufactured from natural materials and chemicals that do not negatively impact human health. This includes the extent to which consumers are aware of a product brand and the information they have to make purchasing decisions. Green Awareness can be measured using the following indicators: (Arshad et al., 2014)

1. Awareness of initiatives implemented by brands to protect the environment.
2. Attention to environmentally friendly logos and slogans utilized by brands.
3. Understanding the meaning of environmentally friendly logos and slogans featured in brand marketing campaigns.
4. Recall of environmentally friendly logos and symbols presented in brand marketing campaigns.
5. Preference for environmentally friendly logos and symbols employed by brands.

Based on the theoretical review above, the theoretical framework in this study is structured as illustrated in the following model:

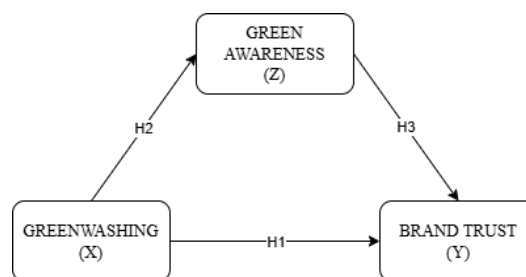


Figure 1: Conceptual Framework
Sources: Data processed by researchers, 2025

3. Method

A quantitative research approach was adopted. The population size is unknown because the exact number of AQUA DANONE users in Samarinda City cannot be determined. The Lemeshow formula was applied to estimate the required sample size under these conditions. This study included a sample of 100 respondents. The respondents in this study were consumers of AQUA products who belong to Generation Z, namely individuals born between 1997 and 2012. Generation Z is generally recognized for its characteristics as digital natives who are accustomed to technological advancements and have a higher level of awareness of sustainability and environmental issues compared to other generations. The inner model, also known as the structural model, was used to predict and test the significance of relationships between variables. The outer model, or measurement model, was used to assess the relationships between indicators and variables. Data analysis was conducted using SmartPLS 4 software.

4. Result and Discussion

In this study, inferential analysis was conducted using Partial Least Squares (PLS)-based Structural Equation Modeling (SEM) approach. The PLS procedure included three stages: evaluation of the outer model, evaluation of the inner model, and hypothesis testing.

Evaluation of Measurement Model (Outer Model)

There are three criteria for measuring the outer model: convergent validity, discriminant validity, and composite reliability (as measured by Cronbach's Alpha). The following are the model and the results of the tests that have been conducted:

Table 2. Measurement Model

Variables	Indicator	Loading Factor	Alpha	CR	AVE
Greenwashing	X1.1	0.705	0.949	0.956	0.688
	X1.2	0.843			
	X2.1	0.719			
	X2.2	0.845			
	X3.1	0.851			
	X3.2	0.896			
	X4.1	0.836			
	X4.2	0.859			
	X5.1	0.850			
	X5.2	0.869			
Brand Trust	Y1.1	0.869	0.953	0.961	0.754
	Y1.2	0.900			
	Y2.1	0.861			
	Y2.2	0.881			
	Y3.1	0.784			
	Y3.2	0.899			
	Y4.1	0.869			
	Y4.2	0.878			
Green Awareness	Z1.1	0.809	0.949	0.953	0.668
	Z1.2	0.817			
	Z2.1	0.817			
	Z2.2	0.771			
	Z3.1	0.820			
	Z3.2	0.922			
	Z4.1	0.767			
	Z4.2	0.827			
	Z5.1	0.829			
	Z5.2	0.791			

Sources: SmartPLS data processing results, 2025

In this study, the convergent validity results in Table 1 indicate that all indicators yield factor load scores of greater than 0.70. In addition, all AVE scores exceed 0.50 (Ghozali & Latan, 2020). Therefore, the research construct can be said to have valid and significant convergent validity. Composite reliability and Cronbach's alpha values exceed the general guideline of 0.70 (Ghozali & Latan, 2020). Therefore, it can be said that the construction has good reliability. Additionally, it can be observed that the AVE table in this study yields a score of more than 0.50, indicating that the model's measurement evaluation exhibits good discriminant validity.

Table 3. Discriminant Validity

Indicators	Greenwashing	Brand Trust	Green Awareness
X1.1	0.705	0.302	0.220
X1.2	0.843	0.408	0.333
X2.1	0.719	0.288	0.208
X2.2	0.845	0.310	0.372
X3.1	0.851	0.336	0.317
X3.2	0.896	0.387	0.383
X4.1	0.836	0.387	0.379
X4.2	0.859	0.336	0.369
X5.1	0.850	0.338	0.325
Z5.2	0.869	0.363	0.372
Y1.1	0.257	0.869	0.730
Y1.2	0.420	0.900	0.799
Y2.1	0.267	0.861	0.687
Y2.2	0.526	0.881	0.805
Y3.1	0.210	0.784	0.776
Y3.2	0.415	0.899	0.827
Y4.1	0.306	0.869	0.712
Y4.2	0.468	0.878	0.775
Z1.1	0.343	0.676	0.809
Z1.2	0.384	0.665	0.817
Z2.1	0.193	0.671	0.817
Z2.2	0.421	0.619	0.771
Z3.1	0.218	0.709	0.820
Z3.2	0.443	0.837	0.922
Z4.1	0.233	0.761	0.767
Z4.2	0.462	0.819	0.827
Z5.1	0.235	0.757	0.829
Z5.2	0.293	0.644	0.791

Sources: SmartPLS data processing results, 2025

The next measurement model is discriminant validity. It was shown that the results of cross loading data processing had a good construct. This was because the indicators in each construct had the highest loading value in their original construct compared to other constructs. Therefore, all variable indicators in this study did not overlap and met the discriminant validity requirements based on cross loading.

Structural Model Evaluation (Inner Model)

Table 4. R Square and Adjusted R Square Values

	R Square	R Square Adjusted
Brand Trust	0.785	0.781
Green Awareness	0.162	0.153

Sources: SmartPLS data processing results, 2025

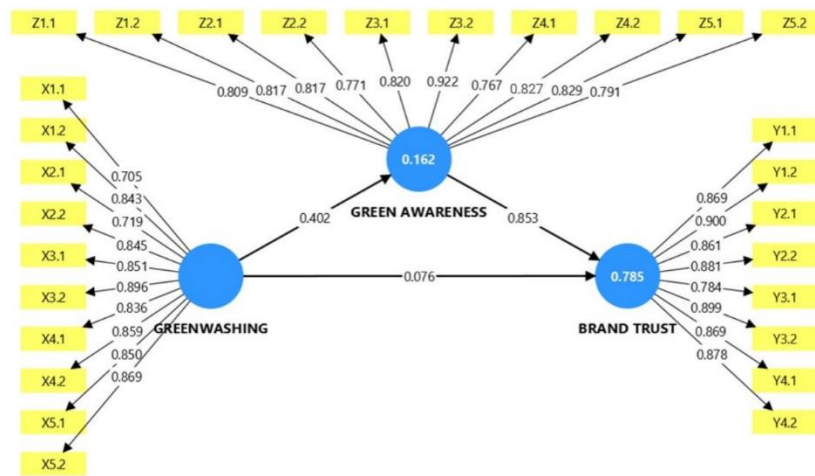


Figure 2: Path Coefficient
Sources: SmartPLS data processing results, 2025

Shows that the R-Square (R^2) value of the brand trust variable (Y) is 0.785, indicating that 78.5% of the brand trust variable (Y) can be influenced by the greenwashing variable (X), while the remaining 21.5% is influenced by variables outside the scope of this study. Therefore, it can be concluded that the R-Square (R^2) for the brand trust variable (Y) is strong. Then, the R-Square (R^2) value for the green awareness variable (Z) is 0.153, indicating that 15.3% of the green awareness variable (Z) can be attributed to the greenwashing variable (X), while the remaining 84.7% is influenced by variables outside the scope of the study. According to Chin (Ghozali, 2021; Ghozali & Latan, 2020), the criteria for R-Square values are >0.67 , >0.33 , and >0.19 for strong, moderate, and weak, respectively. Therefore, it can be concluded that the R-Square (R^2) for the green awareness variable (Z) is weak.

Hypothesis Testing Results

Table 5. Direct Effect
Path Coefficients

Hypothesis	Original Sample (S)	Sample Mean (M)	T-Statistics (O/STDEV)	P Values	Information
H1 (X – Y)	0.076	0.080	1.253	0.210	Rejected
H2 (X – Z)	0.402	0.421	2.825	0.005	Accepted
H3 (Z – Y)	0.853	0.845	16.698	0.000	Accepted

Sources: SmartPLS data processing results, 2025

Table 6. Specific Indirect Effect
Path Coefficient

Hypothesis	Original Sample (S)	Sample Mean (M)	Standard Deviation (STDEV)	T-Statistics (O/STDEV)	P Values
X – Y – Z	0.343	0.357	0.126	2.731	0.006

Sources: SmartPLS data processing results, 2025

Discussion

The results of the first hypothesis test (H1) indicate that the greenwashing variable has no significant effect on the brand trust variable. This conclusion is supported by the original sample value and a p-value of 0.076, indicating a 7.6% negative correlation between greenwashing and brand trust. Additionally, the t-statistic value of 1.253 is lower than the t-table value of 1.960, and the significance value of 0.210 exceeds the 0.05 error rate. The study demonstrates that the greenwashing variable does not affect brand trust. This finding suggests that lower levels of greenwashing among consumers correspond to minimal influence on product brand trust. Generation Z AQUA consumers in Samarinda reported that misleading environmental claims did not diminish their brand trust in AQUA. These findings indicate that this demographic prioritizes factors such as water quality, established brand reputation, and product availability over environmentally friendly claims. These results support the Stimulus-Organism-Response (SOR) theory, which posits that greenwashing serves as a stimulus that generates a response in brand trust perception, contingent upon the consumer's cognitive and emotional processes (Schmuck et al., 2018).

In this context, the findings suggest that 'green' messages can create a positive image in consumers' minds, even when their validity is unverified. This finding aligns with research by Delmas & Burbano (2011), which suggests that the impact of greenwashing on brand trust varies depending on consumers' environmental literacy and the importance they attach to sustainability issues. The results of this study contradict findings by Chen and Chang in Hoang et al. (2025), which report that greenwashing significantly reduces brand trust. This discrepancy may be attributed to Generation Z respondents in Samarinda City, who exhibit limited concern for sustainability issues and continue to perceive AQUA as having a superior reputation compared to other bottled water brands. Consequently, even if AQUA engages in greenwashing practices, consumers remain loyal due to their positive experiences and the brand's strong image.

The second hypothesis test (H2) demonstrates that greenwashing significantly affects green awareness. The sample value of 0.402 indicates a 40.2% positive relationship between greenwashing and green awareness. The t-statistic of 2.825 exceeds the critical value of 1.960, and the significance level of 0.005 is below the 0.05 threshold. The study confirms that greenwashing influences green awareness. This suggests that increased consumer awareness of corporate greenwashing practices corresponds with a higher understanding of sustainability issues. Generation Z AQUA consumers in Samarinda City demonstrate a high level of environmental awareness and responsiveness to company campaigns. This finding suggests that green awareness has a significant impact on consumer perceptions and decision-making. The findings of this study support the Stimulus-Organism-Response (SOR) theory, which explains that green awareness encompasses cognitive and affective mechanisms such as perception, assessment, and the development of environmental awareness.

Rather than creating skepticism, greenwashing practices increase green awareness as consumers become more vigilant and attentive to the validity of product sustainability claims (Apostolopoulos et al., 2025; Promalessy & Handriana, 2024). This supports the research conducted by Walker & Wan in Rahman et al. (2020), which reveals that greenwashing can stimulate an increase in consumer sensitivity to sustainability issues because consumers are motivated to seek credible information related to corporate claims.

Based on the results of the third hypothesis test (H3), it can be stated that the green awareness variable has a significant effect on the brand trust variable. This statement is based on the original sample value and the results of the third hypothesis test, which yields a value of 0.853,

indicating an 85.3% positive relationship between the green awareness variable and the brand trust variable. In addition, the t-statistic value obtained was 16.698, which is greater than the t-table value of 1.960, and the significance value of 0.000 is smaller than the error rate above 0.05 or 5%. The results of the study demonstrate that the green awareness variable has a significant influence on brand trust. This indicates that consumers with a relatively high level of awareness of sustainability issues tend to have more transparent assessments and a greater sense of responsibility towards the brand, thereby increasing their trust in the brand.

Generation Z AQUA consumers in Samarinda City have demonstrated strong confidence in AQUA's reputation, resulting in a significant increase in consumer awareness of sustainability issues, as the relationship between green awareness and brand trust has been established. This has had a direct impact on emotional attachment and trust in AQUA, ultimately triggering loyalty and sustainable purchasing decisions. These findings support the Stimulus-Organism-Response (SOR) theory, which posits that brand trust is a response resulting from a consumer's internal process following exposure to external stimuli. The stimuli received are in the form of information about the product, such as quality, reputation, and company campaigns.

The result of this process is a positive perception, and consumers develop brand trust unconsciously. This supports the research conducted by Alamsyah & Febriani (2020), which found that consumers who understand a brand's environmental campaigns are more likely to perceive the brand as credible.

Data analysis using SmartPLS software indicates an indirect effect among greenwashing, green awareness, and brand trust variables. The test produced significant coefficient values, demonstrating that green awareness functions as a mediating variable. The coefficient for the indirect relationship between greenwashing and brand trust is 0.343, which is substantially higher than the insignificant direct relationship coefficient of 0.076. These findings demonstrate that green awareness plays a critical role in mediating the relationship between greenwashing and brand trust.

The results align with the Stimulus-Organism-Response (SOR) theory, where greenwashing serves as a stimulus that initiates the cognitive process in consumers, represented by green awareness, which subsequently leads to a response in the form of brand trust. The significant indirect effect indicates that green awareness is a psychological factor capable of influencing consumer perceptions.

5. Conclusions

This study aimed to examine the impact of greenwashing on brand trust, specifically with green awareness acting as a mediating variable in the context of bottled drinking water (AMDK) products. The results indicated that greenwashing does not have a direct and significant effect on brand trust. This finding suggests that consumers do not quickly lose or gain trust in a brand solely based on their perception of greenwashing.

However, greenwashing was found to significantly influence green awareness. This means that consumers exposed to misleading green claims tend to become more conscious and critical of environmental issues. Furthermore, green awareness positively affects brand trust, indicating that consumers who possess a higher level of environmental awareness are more likely to trust brands that demonstrate genuine environmental responsibility.

The mediation test further confirmed that green awareness plays a crucial role in connecting greenwashing and brand trust. Even when greenwashing practices are present, consumers with

a stronger sense of green awareness may still develop trust in a brand if they perceive that the company is making consistent environmental commitments. Overall, the study underscores the importance of enhancing consumer awareness as a way to mitigate the negative perceptions associated with greenwashing and to sustain brand trust in environmentally sensitive industries such as bottled drinking water.

Acknowledgements

The author would like to express sincere gratitude to all respondents, and special appreciation is also for academic supervisors for their feedback and guidance. Lastly, the author is thankful to colleagues who helped improve this research.

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