The Washing Knowledge Model: A First Discussion

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Abstract

With approaches such as CSR, purpose marketing and brand activism, companies are increasingly trying to present themselves as responsible actors in society. However, some of the customers do not suspect true sales behind this, but only an attempt at a (so incorrect) representation or a concealment of the opposite ("washing"). It is therefore important for companies to find out exactly when this assumption occurs. This is where this article comes in: It takes up a model developed in a different context – media studies – and discusses for the first time whether this approach can be transferred to the topic of washing and whether and what insights can be derived from it for science and practice.

Keywords

Persuasion Knowledge Model, Washing Knowledge Model, Washing, Customer Knowledge, Customer Communication, Corporate Communication, CSR

Introduction: Brand Activism, Customer Knowledge and Washing

Over the past 20 years, companies have increasingly positioned themselves as part of society and have taken a stance on socially relevant issues: After initial approaches to business ethics, environmental protection and CSR (Drucker, 1981; Golob et al., 2013), more and more socio-political topics were addressed, from discussions on the necessity of a "shared value" (Porter & Kramer, 2006, 2011) to an active commitment to certain values or political attitudes ("Brand Activism", see, e.g., Sakar & Kotler, 2021; Schmidt et al., 2022; or "Purpose Marketing", see e.g. Bruce & Jeromin, 2020; Rüger et al., 2024; Siems et al., 2025).

With regard to the target groups of these activities, especially customers, it can be stated that younger people in particular show a great interest in socio-political issues and have a corresponding expectation of companies (Krishnan et al., 2014; Schmidt et al., 2022). At the same time, it is critically questioned whether such activities are really undertaken by companies or only in appearance ("Washing", see e.g. Nielsen, 2023; Vredenburg et al., 2020). In connection with the large number of corporate activities, new concepts, such as greenwashing (see, e.g., Whellams & MacDonald, 2018), but also bluewashing (Peleo & Chen, 2019), red washing (Vanclay & Hanna, 2019), CSR washing (Pope & Wæraas, 2016) and rainbow washing (Lim et al., 2022; Mücksch et al., 2024; Wulf et al., 2022) highlight the growing (scientific) interest in assessing the skepticism towards the authenticity of corporate activities. Current empirical studies show that in some cases a large number of customers suspect washing (see, e.g., Dubinsky, 2023; Mücksch et al., 2024).

From a practical point of view, the question of when exactly such a suspicion of washing arises among customers is of particular relevance – since then the according communication measures no longer have a positive effect, but a negative one.

This is where this article comes in: We present a transfer of a model established in another context: The Persuasion Knowledge Model (Friestad & Wright, 1994). For this purpose, the model is briefly presented in its original form before an attempt is made to transfer it to the topic of washing. The article ends with first conclusions, limitations and a look into the future.

The Persuasion Knowledge Model

The persuasion knowledge model was originally developed by Friestad and Wright (1994) and is an extension to earlier works on consumer's skepticism towards persuasion attempts by marketers referred to as the "schemer schema" by Wright (1986). The model introduces the concept of *persuasion knowledge*, which can be described as the developed understanding of marketers' persuasion tactics. During a person's lifetime this persuasion knowledge is continuously formed (Friestad & Wright, 1994). In contrast to previous works, consumers are not conceptualized as mere passive individuals, but instead are taking an active role in a persuasion process (Isaac & Calder, 2025) and represent the main focus of the model (Friestad & Wright, 1994). Typical persuasion episodes that Friestad and Wright (1994) describe are TV ads, multimedia ad campaigns or conversations with salespersons. They explain that consumers use their persuasion knowledge form their own beliefs, interpret marketer's intentions and develop responses to persuasion messages.

In the following, we will first outline the terminology of the original persuasion knowledge model as proposed by Friestad and Wright (1994). As illustrated in Figure 1, the model comprises two distinct actors: (1) the persuasion *agent* (i.e., marketer), who initiates the persuasive episode, and (2) the *target* (i.e., the consumer), who is the intended recipient of the persuasion attempt.

As previously mentioned, the model is primarily focusing on the target's perspective. In this context, the agent's *persuasion attempt* refers to not simply the persuasive message itself, but to the target's interpretation of the agent's efforts to influence their beliefs, attitude or concrete behavior through the way information is presented. This attempt can consist of multiple messages communicated across different points in time.

The *persuasion episode* represents the directly observable behavior (message) of the agent, which is visible for the target. The target's reaction to this is referred to as *persuasion coping behavior* and reflects how the target evaluates and responds to the persuasion attempt. This coping behavior is not necessarily negative; rather, it encompasses a range of strategic responses that the target engages in while pursuing their own goals, drawing on various types of subject knowledge.

Furthermore, both actors in the model have a similarly structured persuasion knowledge. While formulating a persuasion attempt, agents draw on their (1) topic knowledge, referring to their understanding of the subject of the persuasion attempt itself (e.g., a service or product); (2) persuasion knowledge (strategic knowledge about how to persuade); and (3) knowledge specifically about the target. Correspondingly, the target relies on a very similar set of knowledge: (1) topic knowledge, (2) persuasion knowledge, and (3) knowledge about the agent (e.g., an agent's motives or expertise). Furthermore, Campbell and Kirmani (2000) find that consumer's tend to use their persuasion knowledge depending in direct (personal) selling situations depending on two factors: their cognitive capacity as well as the agent's accessibility of persuasion motives. In situations in which the agent's motives are hidden and the selling situation is cognitive challenging, customers are less likely to apply persuasion knowledge. However, if the agent's motives are accessible, customers are more likely to contest an agents' honesty.

Traditionally, persuasion research has focused on contexts in which targets are aware of the persuasion attempt, as the recognition of the persuasive intent is a necessary condition in the original article proposed by Friestad and Wright (1994). However, Isaac and Calder (2025) are the first to elaborate on how the PKM is applicable when targets are unaware of the persuasion attempt by proposing a transfer to content marketing. They argue that even when persuasive messages are embedded in content in a subtle or hidden way, consumers may still form responses based on implicit associations or broader beliefs about media practices, without consciously recognizing the persuasion attempt itself. Additionally, the PKM and its applications have been criticized for primarily focusing on the target's persuasion knowledge, while largely neglecting the situational strategies and persuasion knowledge of the agent (Ham et al., 2015).

The persuasion knowledge model has been applied to an extensive number of areas in marketing research to investigate how consumers respond to persuasion attempts by companies or salespeople (Isaac & Calder, 2025). In a recent literature review, Rahmani (2023) identified several key areas, including advertising (e.g., Germelmann et al., 2020), pricing (e.g., Das et al., 2020), CSR (e.g., Hamby et al., 2015), digital marketing (e.g., Chen & Cheng, 2019), and other related marketing disciplines. More recent studies have extended the persuasion knowledge model to emerging technologies, such as consumer reactions towards persuasion attempts by anthropomorphized AI (Usman et al., 2024), voice assistants (Brinson et al., 2024), or digital celebrities (Hwang & Zhang, 2018).

Across these existing studies various approaches to measuring persuasion knowledge were employed, reflecting the lack of a standardized approach to capture the core concept (Ham et al., 2015). A literature review by Ham et al. (2015) reveals that many studies employ a mix of qualitative and quantitative methods, with experimental designs being the most frequently used approach. Measures of persuasion knowledge can be categorized into two forms: dispositional and situational (Ham et al., 2015). Dispositional persuasion knowledge reflects an individual's general lifelong understanding of persuasion tactics, as originally suggested by Friestad and Wright (1994) (Ham et al., 2015). In contrast, situational persuasive knowledge refers to the very specific activation of persuasion knowledge in a given context. It is conceptualized as a temporary activated mental state triggered by a particular tactic while activating higher-order persuasion knowledge (Ham et al., 2015). This type of measurement is regularly used to check if an intended manipulation in an experimental study design is working as intended by the researcher (e.g., Cotte et al., 2005; Matthes et al., 2007). In recent years, the measurement of the construct has become significantly more differentiated, with the development of context-specific scales. Examples include tailored instruments for sponsored content studies (Boerman et al., 2018), online advertising studies (Lorenzon & Russell, 2012), and ad skepticism studies (Obermiller & Spangenberg, 1998).

However, to the best of our knowledge the model has not yet transferred to the context of washing practices. With this conceptual discussion, we respond to calls for extending the persuasion knowledge model to emerging domains in marketing research as highlighted, e.g., by Ham et al. (2015). In addition, we address the call by Isaac and Calder (2025) to apply the persuasion knowledge model to purpose-driven or ethics-related marketing narratives. We believe that this research direction is particularly relevant due to the nature of washing practices trying to influencing consumer perceptions.

In the following chapter, we offer an initial discussion on how the insights of the original model by Friestad and Wright (1994) can be applied in the context of washing.

Transfer to a new field: The Washing Knowledge Model

Citizens, consumers, or stakeholders by socialization and education develop media literacy, a huge part of which is advertising literacy, a substantial part of which again is greenwashing literacy (Álvarez-García & Sureda-Negre, 2023, pp. 270–271; Eng et al., 2021, pp. 1610–1611) – or, as we suggest, any kind of washing literacy. We will use the term washing knowledge interchangeably with washing literacy for the phenomenon that recipients are aware of or in the course of their upbringing and (media and advertising) socialization develop the knowledge that companies and organizations will very often – deliberately or unconsciously – present themselves or their activities, products or services as more environmentally friendly, diversity friendly, anti-discriminative, etc. as they actually are or appear to be (e.g., Seele & Gatti, 2017).

When Friestad and Wright (1994) presented their Persuasion Knowledge Model (PKM) in 1994, they focused on the recipients' knowledge of the persuasive behavior of companies and organizations as it presents itself particularly in (classic) advertising in the shape of prototypical promotional texts like advertisements or sales representations. The PKM was a "thorough conceptual model" (Friestad & Wright, 1994, p. 19), or a meta concept (Woelke, 2022, p. 216). The authors encouraged researchers to address the questions raised by the PKM "by empirical studies" (Friestad & Wright, 1994, p. 25), and quite a few have done so (Woelke, 2022, p. 218). What we suggest is that the PKM can be transferred more or less one to one into a WKM – a Washing Knowledge Model. In a first step, that would simply mean that the term 'persuasion' as a more general concept would be replaced with the narrower, more specific form of (potentially deceptive) persuasion that is 'washing' (cf. Figure 1 and 2).

What seems like a simple, almost banal formal step raises, however, a number of questions and, more importantly, opens up numerous new perspectives and opportunities

First of all, the legitimization of this operation is underlined by the emergence of the term x-washing (greenwashing, pinkwashing, rainbowwashing etc., e.g., Polajnar, 2024), which in itself expresses awareness of the fact that companies try to create the impression of an environmentally etc. friendly company through communication although this is not (entirely) the case.

Furthermore, the fact that companies have reacted to greenwashing accusations by so-called greenhushing (Takur et al., 2023) makes the construct of washing knowledge interesting to analyze. Greenhushing is "conscious concealment of the eco-practices" usually out of "fear of accusation of greenwashing", cf. "hypocrisy avoidance" (Takur et al., 2023, p. 306). This would constitute a washing coping behavior on the part of the agents, and it would be triggered by the washing knowledge of the targets.

Yet another angle is the difference between persuasion as a possibly more plain or even fair attempt of agents to make targets think, feel, or act differently about certain things on the one side and washing as a potentially more deceitful communication activity on the other hand.
A small qualitative study has suggested that washing knowledge exists in a more differentiated form (Mücksch et al., 2024) but further and more comprehensive studies are needed in order to investigate the concept of washing knowledge.

Conclusions, limitations and a look into the future

As shown above, it seems possible to transfer the Persuasion Knowledge Model, which has been used so far in the context of media, to the topic of Washing ("Washing Knowledge Model"). This new model can make an important scientific contribution to explaining whether and when communication by companies is perceived by customers as washing. In current times of social media and the high relevance of brand activism, it seems more important than ever to avoid negative and misperceptions among customers – and to understand in detail what effects occur here and how they can be counteracted if necessary. In practice, this can be used to derive clues as to how the communication of activities of a company with regard to the environment and society should take place – or, if necessary, better not or differently.

What is still missing is concrete evidence and practical testing to further substantiate the transferability. A possible first step would be to conduct interviews with marketing science experts, as well as experts from related fields such as sociology, media studies, or similar disciplines. This can be followed by studies of the target group. Qualitative and/or quantitative approaches seem promising here. Apart from testing the actual transferability of the model, these approaches the same time provide an indication of its practical (and empirical) usefulness. If companies recognize and understand what is exactly relevant here, great potential for future can be assumed here, especially in terms of marketing practice.

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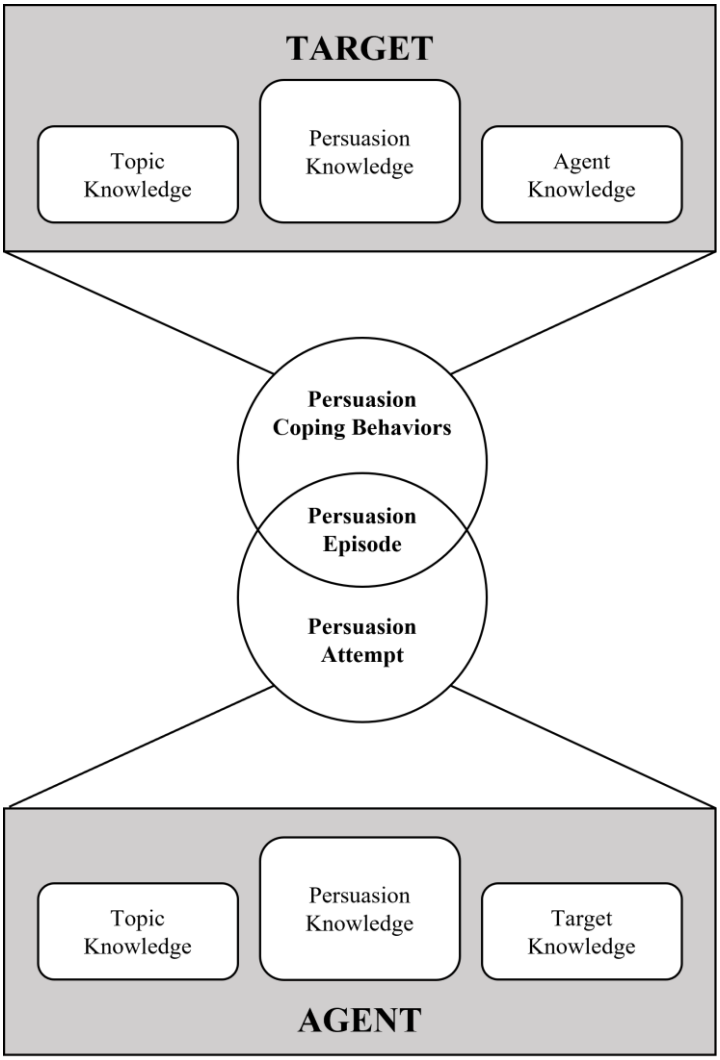
Appendix

Figure 1

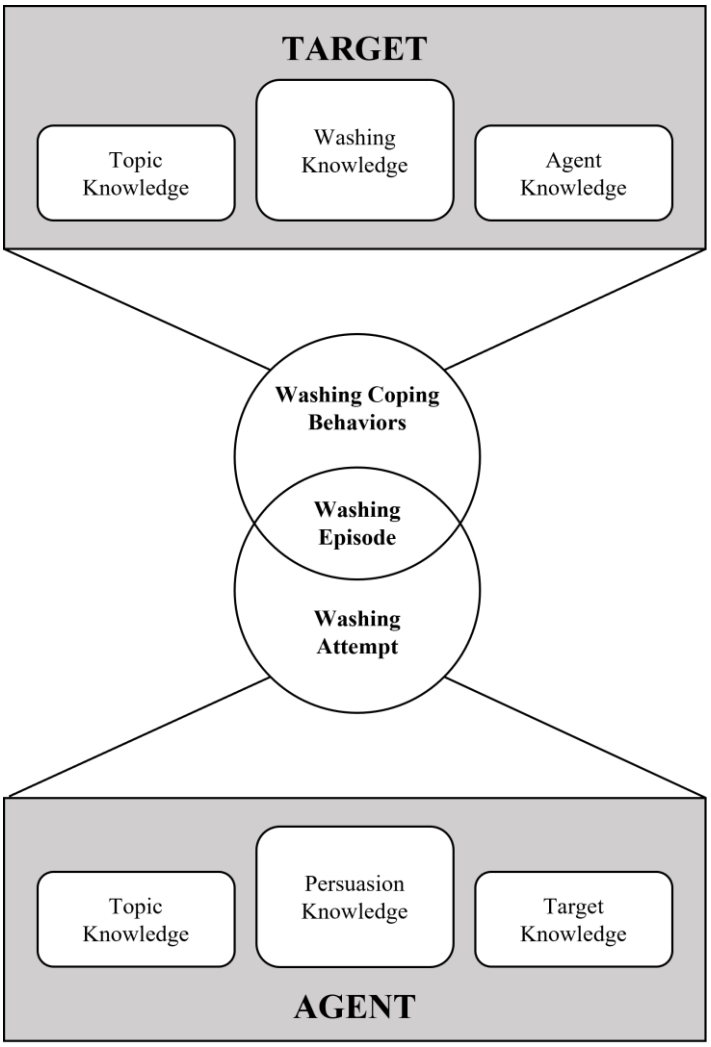
The Original Persuasion Knowledge Model



Note. Adapted from Friestad & Wright (1994)

Figure 2

Adapted Washing Knowledge Model



Note. Own work, adapted from Friestad & Wright (1994)