

RESEARCH ARTICLE

The influence of NGO-corporate relationship on environmental disclosure: Evidence from the fashion industry

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Abstract

Most NGO-corporate relationships have been founded on conflict. However, this pattern has started to change with the emergence of more collaborative (dialog-based) approaches. Academic inquiry into how NGOs influence corporate policies related to sustainable development is a novel field of investigation. This article aims to identify the potential role of conflictual versus collaborative relationships between NGOs and companies in influencing the quality of the environmental disclosure (ED). We also investigate how NGOs may unintentionally lead companies to adopt greenwashing practices. In this article, we derive five propositions by studying the relationships between Greenpeace and 24 firms operating in the fashion industry through a qualitative longitudinal analysis. We gathered data through three semi-structured interviews with the Greenpeace Global Corporate Leader of the Detox Campaign and content analysis of corporate communication documents. Our findings suggest that company behavior toward ED and the odds of greenwashing practices are affected by type of relationship established with NGOs. Specifically, if the NGO-corporate relationship is conflictual, companies tend to achieve higher ED quality in the short and intermediate terms. Vice versa, more collaborative (dialog-based) relationships result in initially low ED quality. However, in the long run, under both types of relationship the quality of ED settles at a medium level. Moreover, NGOs' communication, activism intensity, and pressure constitute powerful means of persuasion and contribute to increasing a campaign engagement rate. However, too much pressure may create a fertile ground for greenwashing, and so may an everlasting conflictual relationship between NGO and companies.

KEYWORDS

environmental disclosure, greenwashing, NGO-corporate relationship, qualitative research, qualitative study, sustainability reporting

1 | INTRODUCTION

In recent decades, a confluence of factors has heightened society's awareness and concern regarding corporate sustainability performance. Possible factors include the increasingly visible effects of

climate change, growing income inequality, human rights concerns in global supply chains, and high-profile corporate scandals. As a result, different stakeholder groups—investors, employees, NGOs, and customers—exert pressure, prompting companies to accelerate the pursuit of sustainability goals under the environmental, social, and

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governance (ESG) dimensions. In this context, sustainability reports (SRs) have become the crucial tool through which companies can account for their ESG policies to a variety of stakeholders (Gray et al., 1997). Creating a report that works for pivotal stakeholders and is comprehensive, relevant, and balanced is no easy feat. It requires a clear understanding of the needs of stakeholders. The best way to do this is to ask them. For this reason, companies around the world are increasingly collaborating with their stakeholders, particularly with nongovernmental organizations (NGOs), to realize their ESG efforts (Fontana, 2018; Schepers, 2006).

Nowadays, NGOs have gained greater recognition and power at the international policy level as agents of civil society (Teegen et al., 2004). The growing participation of several NGOs in United Nations (UN) conferences, meetings, and other events confirms this trend (Teegen et al., 2004). At the same time, many NGOs find themselves with growing responsibility and legitimacy as corporate watchdogs and agents of sustainable development. NGOs can have the power to influence business behavior, either adversely via protest or positively via partnership. As a matter of fact, it has been observed in recent years that some of the most influential changes in sustainability issues made by large players occurred in various industries as a consequence of campaigns organized by NGOs (Gunther, 2015). While in the past most of the interactions between the private sector and NGOs were essentially conflictual, this pattern of NGO-business relations has recently started to change with the emergence of collaborations between these historical “enemies” (Murphy & Bendell, 1997). In the analysis of this interaction, pivotal research has identified various forms of collaboration, such as dialog and certifications (MacDonald & Chrisp, 2005; Rondinelli & London, 2003), research cooperation, and common projects/programs (Kourula & Halme, 2008). In this article, we refer to the term NGO-corporate collaboration as “a systematic form or forums of dialog such as roundtables with NGOs and other stakeholders” and “common projects” with concrete actions and goals (Kourula & Halme, 2008). There are several examples of successful collaborations between NGOs and companies that yielded a positive impact in terms of environmental sustainability. However, a conflictual NGO-corporate relationship may be more fruitful when it comes to sustainability reporting because, for instance, a company pestered by NGO activism and consequently exposed to media pressure, may perceive the urgency to showcase the achievement of environmental goals by publishing sustainability reports (Luo et al., 2017). Conversely, a collaborative relationship might lead to diminished urgency of the “obligation” to publicly share all information since the company’s main interest is to achieve the objectives for which the collaboration was established, and thus fulfill the requirements agreed with the NGO partner. Therefore, it appears to be of great interest to understand how activism campaigns carried out by NGOs, *in collaboration with or against* certain firms, affect the environmental commitment of the latter, especially concerning the quality of environmental disclosure (ED).

Moreover, the campaigns carried out by NGOs and the consequent public exposure to customers and investors put increasing pressure on firms to improve their environmental footprint. Although

NGOs try to dissuade firms from using deceptive advertising, this pressure often leads firms to react in the short-term by reporting fake or misleading information about their environmental initiatives and outcomes, a practice referred to as *greenwashing* (Lee, 2019). Awareness is growing around the world about false environmental claims made by companies and even governments when communicating their strategies on environment and climate issues. However, despite this growing awareness, greenwashing remains largely widespread, especially in the clothing industry (Adamkiewicz et al., 2022). In this regard, it is important to assess whether and how the type of relationship established between NGOs and corporations (i.e., collaborative versus conflictual) can lead companies to be less transparent in the information they disclose, thus raising the odds of greenwashing malpractice adoption. For example, a collaboration between an NGO and a company might reduce the company’s tendency to engage in *greenwashing*, because carrying out initiatives jointly with (or under the supervision of) the NGO should increase consumers and investors’ confidence in the company’s environmental practices. In contrast, a conflictual relationship could more easily incentivize less transparency. Indeed, after a company is labeled by a NGO as not complying with good environmental practices, the same company could tend to react by sending a positive signal to its stakeholders by disclosing information on the achievement of certain environmental goals with the risk of distorting the reality.

The academic study of how NGOs influence corporate policies and operations related to sustainable development is a relatively new field of investigation. Most research in this area has examined the role and influence of government as a driver of ESG under the lens of institutional theory (e.g., Aaronson, 2005; Albareda et al., 2007). Some studies have also examined the factors that may impact companies’ ED, including the level of companies’ environmental performance (Clarkson et al., 2008; Sutantoputra, 2022), stakeholders’ pressure (Sutantoputra, 2022), company’s characteristics (e.g., size and industry sector) (Cormier & Magnan, 2004; Nikolaeva & Bicho, 2011), firm’s profitability (Cormier & Magnan, 2004; Fortanier et al., 2011), and media exposure (Nikolaeva & Bicho, 2011). However, scant attention has been devoted to understanding the role of conflictual versus collaborative relationships between NGOs and companies in leading to environmental and/or social improvements. Specifically, how the type of relationship between NGOs and corporations may influence the quality of ED on the one hand, and how NGOs may unintentionally lead companies to adopt greenwashing practices on the other hand, are not yet fully explored issues. To fill this gap, our aim is to find an answer to the following research questions (RQs):

RQ1. How does the type of relationship between an NGO and a corporation (i.e., *collaborative* versus *conflictual*) during the campaign carried out by the NGO influence corporation’s efforts in terms of ED and their evolution over time?

RQ2. How do communication strategy, activism, and pressure exerted by an NGO influence the participation

rate of companies in the campaign and unintentionally lead participating companies to exhibit false commitment?

RQ3. How does an everlasting conflictual NGO-corporate relationship carried out by the NGO influence the risk of greenwashing practices?

To answer these questions, we conducted a qualitative longitudinal analysis. Specifically, we investigated the relationships between *Greenpeace* and 24 firms operating in the fashion industry that were targeted by the campaign *Detox* for 10 years. In particular, the *Detox* campaign was launched by *Greenpeace* in 2011 and ended in 2021 to raise environmental awareness and responsibility in the fashion industry. We chose to focus on *Greenpeace* as an NGO because, in addition to its global relevance, it does not accept money from companies involved in partnerships, thus ruling out the possibility that environmental campaign outcomes would be influenced by sponsorships. We gathered our data by conducting three semi-structured interviews with *Greenpeace*'s Global Corporate Leader of the *Detox* Campaign (GCLDC), by accessing all the documents of the campaign, and by analyzing in detail the sustainability reports that all the involved companies produced throughout the years.

Our study contributes to the Stakeholder Theory and the growing literature on ED by showing that the type of relationship between a company and NGOs significantly influences the trajectory of ED quality over time. Specifically, conflictual NGO-corporate relationships lead to higher ED quality in the short and intermediate terms, while collaborative relationships result in initially low ED quality. However, in the long run, the type of relationship does not yield substantial differences in the ED quality, as most companies conform to a medium level of disclosure. Our study also highlights the effectiveness of visual rhetoric (visual elements, such as images, typography, and texts) and social activism as communication strategies for NGOs to pressure companies and convince them to join a campaign for environmental improvement. However, we caution that excessive NGO pressure can augment the risk of greenwashing practices among initially poorer performers who choose to join the campaign. Additionally, we pinpoint that the risk of greenwashing is also substantial for companies not committed to environmental goals and in conflictual relationships with NGOs.

Our study derives research propositions that can guide future research in this field, as well as offer valuable insights into the roles, relationships, and strategies of NGOs and their impact on companies, shedding light on the complex dynamics of ED and greenwashing. Specifically, NGOs may consider increase companies' engagement in sustainability campaigns by implementing systematic activism for short- to medium-term responses. For long-term impact, however, NGOs may need to advocate for stricter government regulations to improve corporate environmental performance, as most firms tend to only meet existing standards. Additionally, NGOs may consider the initial disparities in environmental performance among companies

joining a campaign as putting too much pressure may increase greenwashing practice adoption. Meanwhile, companies should be transparent about any disagreements with campaign specifics to maintain credibility and avoid public skepticism.

The remainder of this article is organized as follows. In Section 2 we discuss the theoretical background of the study under the lens of the Stakeholder Theory. In Section 3 we review the literature on NGOs and ED. In Section 4 we describe data and methods used in the study. In Section 5 we discuss our findings and propose research propositions to guide future research. Finally, in Section 6 we provide the theoretical and practical implications of the study, as well as its limitations.

2 | THEORETICAL BACKGROUND: THE STAKEHOLDER THEORY

Stakeholder approach has been pivotal in various streams of business literature. Freeman (1984) defines stakeholders "as groups or individuals who have a relationship with the company and can influence the achievement of the firm's goals." The Stakeholder Theory is a concept related to the organization strategy and suggests that the company is not an entity that operates only for its interest. Rather, an organization's success hinges on how well it manages the relationships with stakeholders (Mitchell et al., 1997; Morsing & Schultz, 2006). Therefore, this theory becomes pivotal when it comes to the company's efforts to make adequate ED to satisfy stakeholder's expectations on ESG issues. According to Freeman (1984), stakeholders may confer different concepts of legitimacy to an entity according to their own value system. Given the dynamic and complex nature of legitimacy, Lindblom (1994) suggests that if an organization believes that its legitimacy is under threat, it can try to alter or manipulate the perceptions of those who bestow legitimacy. Given that legitimacy is subjectively evaluated and conferred by others, legitimation strategies should be founded upon the organization's knowledge of stakeholder views (Chen & Roberts, 2010).

Donaldson and Preston (1995) divide the Stakeholder Theory literature into three broad categories: descriptive/empirical, instrumental, and normative. This classification has served as a guiding structure for scholars and practitioners seeking to understand the diverse applications and perspectives within the Stakeholder Theory. In the realm of descriptive/empirical applications, such theory has been pivotal in describing "how organizations operate and to help predict organizational behavior" (Brenner & Cochran, 1991, p. 452). Notable examples include the use of Stakeholder Theory to describe: the nature of the firm (Brenner & Cochran, 1991); the way managers think about the management of interests (Brenner & Molander, 1977), and how some corporations are actually managed (Clarkson, 1991). The instrumental approach, as identified by Donaldson and Preston (1995), delves into Stakeholder Theory's utility in uncovering the linkages between stakeholder management and the attainment of traditional corporate objectives. Scholars (e.g., Kotter & Heskett, 1992; Mahon &



Wartick, 2003) have explored connections, or their absence, between stakeholder engagement and corporate goals, such as profitability, growth, or brand reputation. In the normative strand, the Stakeholder Theory is used to interpret the function of the corporation, emphasize the ethical and moral dimensions of corporate actions, and advocate for a broader understanding of corporate responsibility that transcends pure financial considerations (Donaldson & Preston, 1995).

Ullmann (1985) introduces a contingency model within the Stakeholder Theory of strategic management, outlining three key dimensions that influence corporate social disclosure (CSD). The first dimension emphasizes stakeholder power, suggesting that a positive relationship between the intensity of stakeholder demands and CSD is crucial for effective management strategy. The second dimension focuses on the firm's strategic posture toward social demands, classifying it as either active or passive. An active posture involves a management that endeavors to influence company's status with key stakeholders through developing disclosure programs, continuous monitoring, and institutionalizing reporting activities, leading to higher expected CSD. The third dimension considers the company's past and current economic performance, highlighting its impact on CSD. Financial resources play a dual role in determining the weight of social demands. In periods of low profitability, the importance placed on meeting CSD goals, and consequently the ability to undertake costly disclosure programs related to collecting, analyzing, and auditing data, may become secondary (Chiu & Wang, 2015).

According to prior research, five categories of stakeholders can be identified (Huq et al., 2016), in addition to the traditional actors of the supply chain (buyers, suppliers, and consumers). These five key stakeholders include the media, NGOs, trade unions, industry associations, and regulatory bodies. All these stakeholders are active in setting target levels of environmental performance and finding the best ways to achieve them. In particular, NGOs play, nowadays, a prominent role in the landscape of international environmental institutions, both directly participating to numerous activities, such as negotiation of international agreements, implementation and monitoring of major environmental deals, and indirectly scrutinizing companies' actions, transparency, and reporting (Huq et al., 2016). Moreover, NGOs can organize public demonstrations and launch campaigns to draw attention in order to correct environmental failures (Huq et al., 2016; Tsoi, 2010). However, the company's management may not give all stakeholders the same level of importance in meeting their demands, given the constraints imposed by the limited resources. Different criteria have been suggested as determinants of how and why managers should allocate priorities to competing stakeholder demands. In defining the stakeholder-management relationship, Mitchell et al. (1997) argue that stakeholder identification and salience are a function of the stakeholder possessing one or more of the three relationship attributes: (1) the stakeholder's power to influence the firm, retaining or providing resources to the company or engaging the government in forcing the company to meet their demands, (2) the legitimacy of the stakeholder's relationship with the firm, and (3) the urgency, which refers to the degree to which stakeholders require immediate attention based on time sensitivity or criticality.

3 | NGOs AND THEIR INFLUENCE ON ED

3.1 | NGO-corporate relationships and ED under the stakeholder theory lens

NGOs play a significant role when it comes to ED and reporting, often acting as intermediaries between corporations and local communities. Several studies have adopted the Stakeholder Theory lens for understanding how NGOs influence corporate ED practices. NGOs have emerged as powerful stakeholders by advocating for greater transparency and accountability in corporate environmental practices. NGOs utilize various mechanisms to influence corporate ED. Specifically, NGOs engage in public campaigns, organizing peaceful protests, such as demonstrations and symbolic acts designed to attract public attention and pressure corporations to adopt more sustainable practices (Brander et al., 2023; Greenpeace, 2023). Moreover, research highlights that visual and creative forms of communication like videos, posters, and sticker campaigns have a profound psychological impact, making them effective strategies for stakeholder engagement and advocacy (Boiral, 2016; Dhanani, 2019). These campaigns can cause reputational risks for companies, prompting them to enhance their disclosure practices (Doh & Guay, 2006). NGOs often serve as watchdogs, monitoring corporate environmental performance and pressuring companies to disclose environmental impacts and sustainability efforts. Eesley and Lenox (2006) showed that environmental NGOs with a higher level of power and legitimacy have a higher likelihood that the targeted company responds positively to their requests for better transparency in environmental reporting. NGOs also engage in collaborative efforts with corporations to improve environmental performance and reporting.

In addition to positively influencing strategic management practices, collaboration between business organizations and NGOs fosters the creation of new knowledge and synergistic solutions (Savitz & Weber, 2006). Amran et al. (2014) argue that partnerships with NGOs lead to organizational learning through multiple pathways, including the impact on organizational culture and the facilitation of teamwork. This, in turn, enhances the incentives for businesses to disclose sustainability information. Moreover, some NGOs participate in the evaluation of multinational buyers' supply chain sustainability (Gualandris et al., 2015). NGOs often provide third-party verification and certification of environmental declarations, adding credibility to the disclosed information. In this respect, certification schemes like the Forest Stewardship Council (FSC) are examples where NGOs play a crucial role in validating corporate claims about sustainable practices (Overdevest, 2010). O'Dwyer et al. (2005) document evidence of a widespread demand for mandated and externally verified sustainability reporting from social and environmental NGOs. Additionally, NGOs act as intermediaries, translating complex environmental data into accessible information for stakeholders. This function enhances stakeholder engagement and helps hold companies accountable for their environmental impacts (Fransen & Kolk, 2007). One notable example is the Carbon Disclosure Project (CDP), an NGO that collects and disseminates information on corporate greenhouse gas emissions and

climate strategies. Research indicates that companies participating in the CDP are more likely to improve their environmental performance due to the external pressure (Villena & Dhanorkar, 2020), and public scrutiny facilitated by the NGO (Kolk et al., 2008). Finally, NGOs often collaborate with other stakeholders, such as governments and international organizations, to strengthen environmental regulations and reporting standards. This multistakeholder approach ensures that corporate disclosures align with broader societal expectations and regulatory requirements (Kolk et al., 2008).

3.2 | Collaborative versus conflictual NGO-corporate relationship: Impact on ED

After reviewing the theoretical foundations of the study, we identify the main dynamics and strategies in NGO-corporate relationships, which are useful to address our first research question (RQ1). Studies document a wide range of strategies available to NGOs to influence corporate practices to become more sustainable. Specifically, NGOs can set up either collaborative or conflictual relationships with companies. Gray (1989) defines collaboration as a process through which parties who see different aspects of a problem can constructively explore their differences and seek solutions that go beyond their limited views. Collaboration can take on different levels of intensity and is central to partnerships, where NGOs can provide advice or guidance to companies to enhance their CSR, and also reassure consumers that the products they have purchased meet sustainability standards, thus providing credibility and legitimacy through the trust they inspire in consumers (Rivera-Santos & Rufin, 2010; Rondinelli & London, 2003). On the contrary, a disadvantage associated with collaboration is mainly due to the fact that in some cases partnerships are financed by companies, creating dependency between NGO and company, which could lead to deviations from the intended objectives and any misconduct can cause serious repercussions on the NGO's credibility and legitimacy (Stafford et al., 2000). The conflictual relationship, on the other hand, manifests via anticorporate campaigns, watchdog activism, and litigation (Utting, 2005). By employing this strategy, NGOs not only put companies under pressure to meet agreed-upon social expectations and formal legal requirements, but also endeavor to change broader expectations regarding responsibility, environmental management, and government regulations (Gray, 1989).

Based on the above considerations, we aim to enrich the literature by investigating how the type of relationship between NGOs and companies may influence the quality of ED. Specifically, we explore whether a conflictual (rather than collaborative) NGO-corporate relationship may have a greater impact on the campaign engagement rate and company's ED. Being exposed to a social pressure, a company could react by sending a positive signal to its stakeholders via ED and sharing evidence of its progress. Our viewpoint is naturally grounded on the Stakeholder Theory. Lindblom (1994) and Hummel and Schlick (2016) suggest that if an organization feels that its legitimacy is threatened by the actions of a stakeholders (e.g., under a conflictual relationship), it may seek to alter or manipulate the perceptions of

those who confer legitimacy, or it may seek to align its value system with the ones shared by the majority of stakeholders. On the other hand, a collaborative relationship may lead to a lesser perception of the "obligation" to publicly share all information, since the company's main objective is to achieve the goals for which the collaboration was initiated, and thus to mainly fulfill the NGO's requirements along the agreed lines. Moreover, close collaborations may lead companies to be more concerned about the public aspects of the relationship, rather than focusing on the development of fruitful ESG initiatives (Peloza & Falkenberg, 2009).

3.3 | NGOs-corporate relationship and the risk of greenwashing practices

The integration of stakeholder needs into organizational strategies is a critical component of effective management, often referred to as stakeholder engagement (Ferrón Vilchez et al., 2021). This concept, defined by Sharma and Vredenburg (1998) as "the ability to establish trust-based collaborative relationships with a wide variety of stakeholders" (p. 735), emphasizes the importance of building trust and collaboration in achieving organizational goals. Organizations utilize various stakeholder engagement mechanisms to gather information about stakeholders' environmental interests and expectations. This engagement fosters a strategic, gradual process that allows stakeholders to participate in the environmental decision-making processes of firms (Garcés-Ayerbe et al., 2019). By actively involving stakeholders, firms can better align their strategies with stakeholder expectations (Ferrón Vilchez et al., 2021), leading to more informed and sustainable decision-making.

However, the integration of stakeholder interests into environmental strategies can yield different outcomes. On the one hand, as previously discussed, firms may adapt to stakeholder requirements through proactive measures, implementing advanced environmental practices that reflect a genuine commitment to sustainability (Ferrón Vilchez et al., 2021; Murillo-Luna et al., 2008). On the other hand, the need of legitimacy and stakeholder pressure lead companies to use SR to communicate a reputable image (Holder-Webb et al., 2009), avoiding any negative impact (Hahn & Lülfes, 2014). To accomplish this goal, some companies may be tempted to engage in greenwashing practices, and thus use SR to communicate an image that exceeds their actual ESG performance, misrepresenting reality (Seele & Gatti, 2017).

Proactive greenwashing occurs when companies intentionally exaggerate their environmental initiatives to gain a competitive advantage by improving their corporate reputation (Lyon & Montgomery, 2015; Marquis et al., 2016). Stakeholder pressure can also result in reactive responses, where the risk of greenwashing is higher. In this context, firms may misrepresent their environmental efforts to shield themselves from external pressures, particularly in environmentally sensitive or polluting industries (Cho & Patten, 2007). Reactive greenwashing typically emerges when firms feel compelled to respond to stakeholder demands without making substantive changes to their practices. This approach often serves to maintain a favorable



corporate image temporarily until the truth is revealed, ultimately jeopardizing trust-based relationships.

Delmas and Burbano (2011) identified four drivers that tempt organizations to greenwash. First, they examined the “external non-market drivers,” which emphasize the importance of regulatory, normative, and cognitive factors in shaping companies' decisions to adopt specific practices. The regulatory environment indirectly affects the other drivers of greenwashing, influencing the availability and reliability of environmental information about a company that can be accessed by consumers, investors, and managers. Furthermore, NGOs, together with and through the media, currently play a watchdog role (Lee, 2019). By campaigning and disseminating information on greenwashing incidents, NGOs try to ensure that the ESG practices declared by companies are actually achieved and there is no distortion in the information shared. As consumers, public opinion, and investors become more interested in environmental issues, green activist groups become more powerful and can exert more influence and pressure on companies (Nøjgaard, 2023). The second category of drivers, identified by Delmas and Burbano (2011), are the “external market drivers,” which include the pressure generated from consumers, investors, and competitors, especially for companies with low environmental awareness. The greater the pressure from consumers and investors perceived by the company, the greater the likelihood of greenwashing. Higher pressure can also be induced by higher visibility and stakeholder proximity (Chen & Chang, 2013; Schons & Steinmeier, 2016). The competitive landscape is also a critical element to consider, as a firm will tend to follow those organizations in the same industry perceived as more legitimate or successful. Research has shown that this also applies to the adoption of greenwashing practices (Walker & Wan, 2012). Delmas and Burbano (2011) also identified “organizational drivers” as the third type of drivers, such as company characteristics, the incentive structure, and the effectiveness of communication within the company, and “individual drivers,” as the fourth, which include psychological and cognitive factors at the individual level.

Montgomery et al. (2023) conceptualize the changes in greenwashing research into three key phases: Greenwashing 1.0 called “Static Communication”; Greenwashing 2.0 called “Dynamic Management”; and Greenwashing 3.0 called “Narratives about the Future.” Greenwashing 1.0 tends to focus on single environmental issues appealing to limited stakeholder groups, often consumers, with minimal engagement of intermediaries (usually NGOs) that could provide independent scrutiny of the firm's messages. The transition to Greenwashing 2.0 marks a significant shift in corporate sustainability strategies. Companies began to recognize the complexity of stakeholder interests and the cognitive limitations that various groups might face in interpreting sustainability messages. This phase incorporates a broader range of issues that appeal to multiple stakeholders, moving beyond a singular focus on consumers. Firms begin to engage with multiple intermediaries, enhancing scrutiny and accountability in their messaging. Greenwashing 3.0 represents the most advanced phase of this evolution, where the consequences of greenwashing may reduce companies' ability to secure funding from investors. This phase introduces the concept of “future-washing,” where firms craft narratives

about their long-term sustainability goals without necessarily providing verifiable evidence of current practices.

This study employs the framework presented by Delmas and Burbano (2011) and the evolution model of greenwashing (in particular, Greenwashing 1.0 and 2.0) proposed by Montgomery et al. (2023) to interpret the key findings related to our second and third research questions (RQ2 and RQ3), which focus on the risk of greenwashing. A collaborative relationship could reduce the odds of greenwashing because consumers and investors (market drivers) are more likely to trust company's environmental practices when they are directly advised by the NGO (nonmarket driver). Conversely, a corporation experiencing a conflictual relationship with an NGO may be incentivized to use greenwashing practices because corporations want to send positive signals in the short-term to reduce the negative stakeholders' perception. Under the circumstances, corporations indeed tend to share only positive information or communicate an image that exceeds their actual ESG performance just to manipulate stakeholders' views (Hahn & Lülfes, 2014; Holder-Webb et al., 2009).

4 | RESEARCH DESIGN

4.1 | Research context

Since this article is the first attempt to understand how the type of NGO-Corporate relationship may influence ED quality and how NGOs may increase the odds of greenwashing practices adoption, we use an exploratory approach. In particular, we employed qualitative research approach for several reasons. First, qualitative research enables more in-depth analysis of complicated real-life problems, allowing researchers to develop inductive theory (Eisenhardt & Graebner, 2007). Second, the adaptability of this type of research provides access to the collection of rich data through interviews, personal observation, and the review of archival sources useful for cross-validation (Voss et al., 2002).

We focused on a single industry—the fashion industry—because it has been the subject of public scrutiny in the last years, partly due to recent environmental disasters and unsustainable business practices. Massive industry water consumption, strong carbon dioxide emissions, and textile waste are some of the main problems of this sector. Not to mention the massive use of chemicals, namely substances that are critically risky not only for the environment, but also for the health of human beings. “In one example, a single European textile-finishing company uses over 466 g of chemicals per kilogram of textile” (Niinimäki et al., 2020). On the one hand, those issues have led to an increase in social pressure on firms to improve ESG dimensions and adopt SR to communicate their efforts to stakeholders. On the other hand, greenwashing scandals in this sector are becoming more frequent due to the increasing pressure. For example, describing polyester products as “recycled” when the material cannot be reused again at the end of life is one of the most common greenwashing messages (The Guardian, 2022). For these reasons, the clothing industry is a relevant setting to our scopes, offering a fertile ground to better

TABLE 1 Profiles of companies.

Category-Catwalk 2016	Company	Segment	Country
Avant Garde	Inditex	Fast Fashion	Spain
	Benetton	Fast Fashion	Italy
	H&M	Fast Fashion	Sweden
Evolution mode	C&A	Fast Fashion	Belgium
	Fast Retailing (Uniqlo)	Fast Fashion	Japan
	G-star	Fast Fashion	Netherlands
	Mango	Fast Fashion	Spain
	Miroglio	Fast Fashion	Italy
	Valentino	Luxury	Italy
	Adidas	Sport	Germany
	Burberry	Luxury	UK
	Levi's	Fast Fashion	U.S.
	Primark	Fast Fashion	Ireland
	Puma	Sport	Germany
	M&S	Fast Fashion	UK
Faux pas	Esprit	Fast Fashion	China
	Victoria Secret (Limited brand)	Fast Fashion	U.S.
	Li-Ning	Sport	China
	Nike	Sport	U.S.
Toxic addicted	Dolce & Gabbana	Luxury	Italy
	GAP	Fast Fashion	U.S.
	Metersbonwe	Fast Fashion	China
	Calvin Klein (PVH)	Fast Fashion	U.S.
	Versace	Luxury	Italy

understand the multinational companies' behavior concerning ED and the risk of greenwashing practices.

This study presents a qualitative longitudinal analysis of the relationships between Greenpeace and 24 multinational firms operating in the fashion industry that were targeted by the campaign Detox, carried out by Greenpeace for more than 10 years to raise environmental awareness and responsibility. The relationship between Greenpeace and a single company is our unit of analysis, so the dyads between an NGO and the various corporate companies are the object of the study.

Greenpeace is actively involved in pushing the big fashion brands to work in synergy with their suppliers to make their production chains eco-sustainable. The aim is to reduce the high environmental footprint of the fashion industry. In particular, the Detox campaign was an initiative started by Greenpeace in 2011 and concluded in 2021. Although some issues are still evolving, the ultimate goal was to eliminate from garments all those chemical substances that are hazardous to humans and the ecosystem (Greenpeace, 2018). Brands were evaluated from the perspective of the Detox deadline set to 2020 for eliminating hazardous chemicals through their entire supply chain as to whether they had or were in the process of equipping themselves with the necessary tools to monitor those chemicals in the wastewater. In the first phase of the campaign (2011–2016), the companies were grouped into four categories depending on the credible steps they had undertaken: “Avant-garde” if they performed well on at least two criteria (which are discussed later) and had no critical

failures on any of them; “Faux Pas” if critical failures were observed on at least two criteria; “Evolution Mode,” resulting from a situation in between Avant-Garde and Faux Pas ratings; “Toxic Addicted,” if no credible commitment was made and/or companies refused joining the campaign. Five companies were categorized as “toxic addicted” as they did not commit to Detox. Out of the remaining 19 companies, only 3 were categorized in the “Avant-garde” category, 12 were still in the “Evolution Mode” phase, whereas 4 brands were making “faux pas” (see Table 1). The 19 companies initially had a more or less marked conflictual relationship with the NGO; then, when they committed to the campaign, they started a cooperation with the NGO, intended to be a systematic dialog for the achievement of the objectives set by the campaign. In contrast, the five companies that did not join the campaign established an everlasting conflictual relationship with Greenpeace and were repeatedly accused of lack of interest in the environmental issues promoted by the Detox campaign.

4.2 | Data collection and analysis

4.2.1 | Semi-structured interviews with Greenpeace and secondary data collection

Semi-structured interview protocols were used in this study to enhance reliability and validity of our qualitative research data



(Yin, 1994). This approach gave us the freedom to probe participant for details and allow for a more open discussion of delicate topics while ensuring that the interviews included aspects pertinent to environmental sustainability. We carried out three semi-structured interviews, nearly of 2 h each, with Greenpeace's GCLDC. During the first interview in July 2022, we asked questions and discussed about the following topics: themes addressed during the campaign and the companies involved, the type of NGO-corporate relationships undertaken and their dynamics over time, quantitative control parameters used during the Detox campaign. The second interview, conducted in September 2022, examined greenwashing issues, such as the risk of greenwashing practice as emerging from sustainability reports, possible cases of greenwashing during the Detox campaign or in other campaigns, and the attention devoted by the NGO to the risk of greenwashing when choosing how to approach companies. Finally, a third follow-up interview was performed in July 2023 to validate and further elaborate our findings. Additionally, multiple sources of secondary data, including campaign documents, as well as the SR of all the involved companies produced throughout the years (if available) were used. Figure 1 provides a guidance for the reader to follow step-by-step the data collection and the coding process performed.

A flexible coding process was adopted, where we initially used codes derived from the first interview and then we conducted an on-desk analysis considering the three reports prepared by Greenpeace to monitor the results and achievements of the companies involved over time: Detox Catwalk 2016 (Detox, 2016), Destination Zero 2018

(Greenpeace, 2018), Self-Regulation: A Fashion Fairy-tale 2021 (Greenpeace, 2021). Such descriptive first-cycle coding aided in summarizing the data from recordings and reports (Miles et al., 2014). The first cycle of coding was followed by a second cycle, which entailed creating inferential pattern codes to identify new themes and formulate our propositions.

4.2.2 | NGO-corporate relationship and ED

Detox Catwalk 2016—First leg of the campaign (2011–2016)

Regarding the report “Detox Catwalk 2016,” we applied a content analysis to examine companies' performance in terms of ED. This procedure was instead not necessary for the reports of the subsequent years (2018, 2021) because brands were evaluated by Greenpeace not using textual judgments (as in 2016), but standardized criteria. The output of the content analysis is reported in three different Tables S1–S3, one for each criterion used by Greenpeace to evaluate the brands.

The first criterion, named *Detox 2020*, assessed a company's chemical management system and the methodology required to draw up the *Manufacturing Restricted Substances List* (MRSL), a list used to identify hazardous chemicals used in production by suppliers and prioritize them for elimination before 2020. The entries *Chemical Management* and *All Hazardous Chemical* replace this criterion in the 2018 and 2021 reports, respectively.

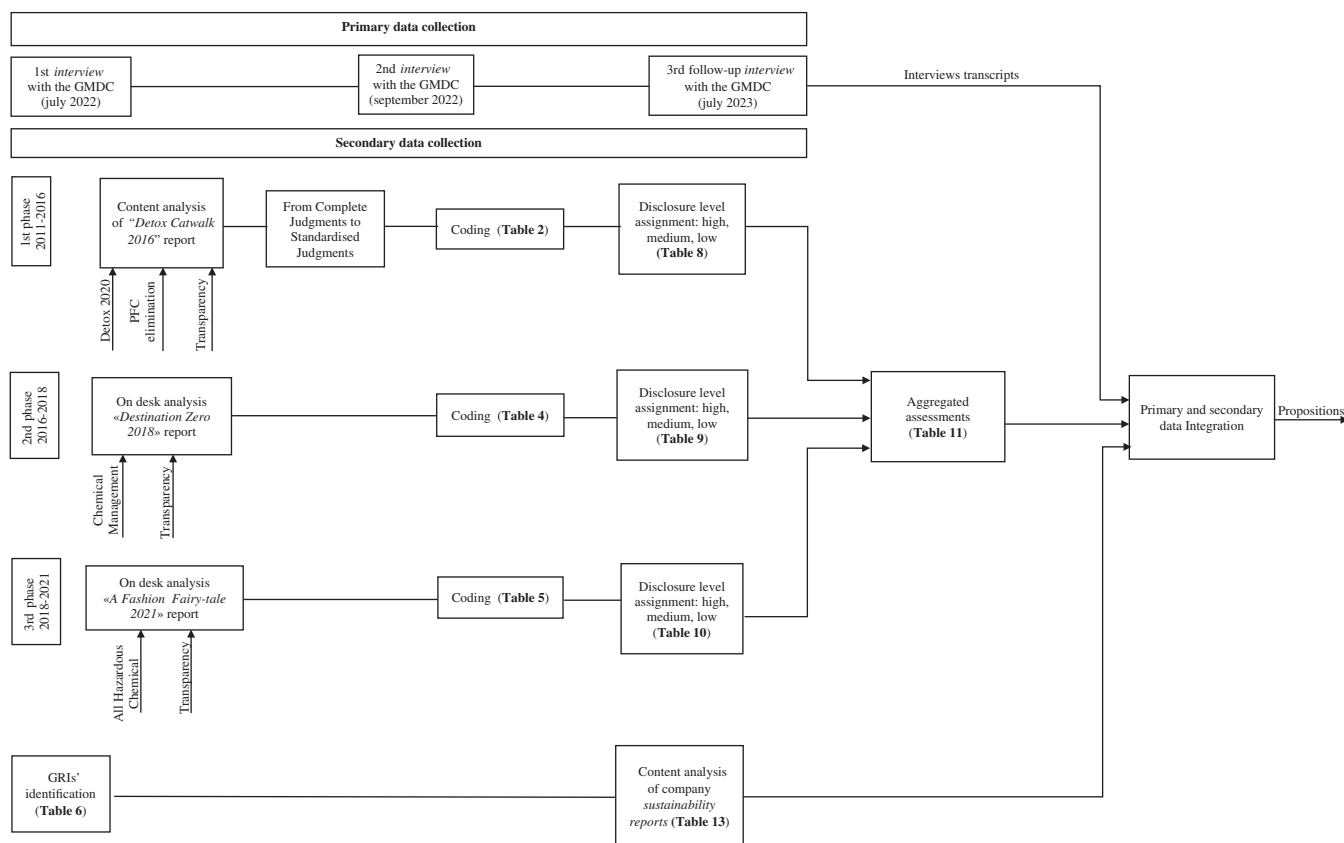


FIGURE 1 Flowchart of the activities performed for data collection and coding. Data sources in *italic font*.



The second criterion, *PFC elimination*, assessed the progress made in the elimination of any use and discharge of one of the groups of widely used hazardous chemicals for polyfluorinated compounds (PFC). In the 2018 report, this item is referred to as *Substitution*, whereas Greenpeace no longer used this criterion in the 2021 report.

Finally, the third criterion, *Transparency*, assessed whether the company ensured that its suppliers regularly published data on discharges of hazardous chemicals from their wet processes and whether the company disclosed the list of its suppliers (including second-tier suppliers, where wet processes are typically conducted).

For each of the three criteria, we defined three *Standardized Judgments* (SJs) (see Table 2). Subsequently, relying on the *Complete Judgment* (CJs), (i.e., the full excerpt of the text found in the report Detox Catwalk, including all aspects (not just ED) considered by Greenpeace to evaluate each brand for a given criterion), we assigned the SJs to the various companies. Afterwards, we assigned a *Disclosure Level*: Low, Medium, or High to each of the SJs previously identified. This judgment indicates the quantity and quality of environmental information shared by companies, according to the associative modalities exemplified in Table 2.

Destination Zero 2018 and Fashion Fairytale 2021—Second and third legs of the campaign (2016–2018 and 2018–2021)

We did not apply a content analysis for the ED assessments for the periods after 2016 (i.e., 2018 and 2021 reports) because the data in the reports were already easily traceable to the SJs identified in 2016. The only exception was the criterion *Transparency*, which was built using the supplier tier and the percentage of data shared by suppliers regarding their wastewater discharge practices. The criterion for interpreting this information is presented in Table 3. To homogenize this criterion with the SJs, we combined both pieces of information into one judgment. For example, if a company presented “Wastewater data published >80” and “Tier 1, 2, and 3,” then we translated this informative pair into “The list of suppliers (with all levels) and the list of data are complete.”

The salient information has been aggregated in Tables S4 and S5 for each evaluation period. In Table 4, we report the 3-levels SJs for the 2 criteria (*Chemical management* and *Transparency*) used for the second leg of the Detox campaign, “Destination Zero 2018,” as well as the 3-levels of Disclosure: low, medium, or high assigned to each of

the SJs previously identified. In the same way, in Table 5 we report the 3-levels SJs for the 2 criteria (All Hazardous Chemical and Transparency) used for the third leg of the Detox campaign, “Fashion Fairytale 2021,” as well as the 3-levels of Disclosure assigned to each of the SJs previously identified.

4.2.3 | NGO–corporate relationship and the risk of greenwashing

According to Greenpeace, greenwashing is “making people believe that your company is doing more to protect the environment than it

TABLE 3 Legend for criterion: transparency 2016–2018 and transparency 2018–2021.

Shared suppliers' data	Wastewater data published >80%	Data list complete
	Wastewater data published 50%–80%	Data list incomplete
	Wastewater data published <50%	
Shared suppliers' levels	Tiers 1, 2, and 3	Supplier list is complete
	Tiers 1 and 2	Supplier list is incomplete
	Tier 1	

TABLE 4 Assignment of disclosure level to standardized judgments—Destination Zero 2018.

Legend—Destination Zero 2018		
Chemical management	Transparency	Disclosure level
Individual MRSL	The list of suppliers (all levels) and the list of data are complete	High
Basic ZDHC MRSL+ additions	The list of suppliers (all levels) is complete, but the list of data is incomplete and vice versa	Medium
Basic ZDHC MRSL	The list of suppliers (all levels) and the list of data are both incomplete	Low

TABLE 2 Assignment of disclosure level to standardized judgments—Detox Catwalk 2016.

Legend—Detox Catwalk 2016			
DETOX 2020	PFC elimination	Transparency	Disclosure level
Individual MRSL	Communication of progress on the “PFC elimination” objective and case study's publication useful for substitution	The list of suppliers (all levels) and the list of data are complete	High
Basic ZDHC MRSL+ additions	Communication of progress on the “PFC elimination” objective without the case study's publication useful for substitution	The list of suppliers (all levels) is complete, but the list of data is incomplete or vice versa	Medium
Basic ZDHC MRSL	Communication of progress on the “PFC elimination” objective not complete and without the case study's publication useful for substitution	The list of suppliers (all levels) and the list of data are both incomplete	Low

TABLE 5 Assignment of disclosure level to standardized judgments-fashion fairytale 2021.

Legend—fashion fairytale 2021		
All hazardous chemical	Transparency	Disclosure level
Individual MRSL	The list of suppliers (all levels) and the list of data are complete	High
Basic ZDHC MRSL+ additions	The list of suppliers (all levels) is complete, but the list of data is incomplete	Medium
Basic ZDHC MRSL	The list of suppliers (all levels) and the list of data are both incomplete	Low

actually is” (Greenpeace, 2021). Based on this basic definition, Greenpeace in its Detox campaign considered greenwashing practices advertisements that (a) make false or misleading claims on the environmental activities conducted by the company, and (b) promote fallacious pro-environment solutions. In this paper, we consider the Greenpeace's definition of greenwashing.

As already mentioned, we conducted a second interview with Greenpeace's GCLDC on this topic in September 2022. The interview was transcribed and subsequently coded. Even in this case, the initial coding captured broad topics, such as greenwashing practice on SR and how to evaluate information reliability, cases of greenwashing practices after the Detox campaign and other campaigns organized by Greenpeace and, finally, greenwashing's considerations when choosing the type of NGO-Corporate relationship to undertake. Such inductive first-cycle coding aided into initially summarize segments of data from the recordings (Miles et al., 2014). Moreover, to triangulate and support the interview data, we conducted an on-desk analysis of the documents most oriented toward this practice. Specifically, we analyzed reports, websites, and documentation on sustainability activities of the five companies that have made no credible environmental commitment, identified in the Detox Catwalk 2016 report as “Toxic Addicted” (see Table 1). From the interview and the literature review (e.g., Delmas & Burbano, 2011; Ruiz-Blanco et al., 2022), it emerged that there is no single, objective methodology to assess the reliability of a SR and exclude possible greenwashing practices. However, we were able to take advantage of the GCLDC's point of view, who shared with us Greenpeace's *modus operandi* in assessing the presence of possible greenwashing practices from a sustainability report: “We start from the premise that production chains are often very complex, and to assess complexity, you need to have a systematic approach. [...], use more ‘systemic’ parameters, such as transparency and traceability. If a company has a good traceability system that includes its production network, suppliers, sub-suppliers, and can simply trace the supply chain, then this is a good starting point because it suggests that the company, if it decides to make more sustainability commitments, will be able to monitor and govern the change that we have asked.” (GCLDC of Greenpeace). Accordingly, we looked at the transparency and traceability of the information in the reports published until 2020. We used the presence and the level of detail of a number of global

TABLE 6 Global reporting initiative (GRI) standards.

Standard	Reporting requirements
GRI 102-9	A description of the organization's supply chain, including its main elements as they relate to the organization's activities, primary brands, products, and services
GRI 303-1	Information about the company management of water resources and related impacts. A special focus on its connection with suppliers
GRI 303-4	Information about the total water discharge divided into all areas (discharge basins). Substances potentially hazardous to water bodies released during discharge. Focus on discharge limits and percentage of suppliers with significant impacts on water resources
GRI 308-2	Environmental assessment of suppliers found to have a significant and potentially negative environmental impact

reporting initiative (GRI) standards as an evaluation criterion because several studies (Adams, 2004; Ruiz-Blanco et al., 2022) have pointed out that following GRI standards allow companies to draw up comparable and credible ESG disclosures, thus increasing transparency. Furthermore, companies that do not follow the GRI standards are more likely to engage in greenwashing than companies following them (Ruiz-Blanco et al., 2022). To maintain continuity in the analysis done so far, a specific set of GRI standards have been considered. These standards best express Greenpeace's environmental demands regarding supply chain, management of hazardous chemicals, and wastewater. Specifically, the selected GRI standards are listed briefly in Table 6.

5 | FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

5.1 | NGO's strategies to push companies toward commitment

The timeline of key Detox campaign events for each company in the joining phase of the campaign (2011–2014) is shown in Table 7. Greenpeace used both “peaceful protest” and “creative communication” in the Detox campaign (Greenpeace USA, 2013). Both strategies aimed to accomplish two goals simultaneously: raising awareness about global environmental issues and advocating for essential solutions that lead to a green and peaceful future. Specifically, Greenpeace used written communication in the form of press releases, but also visual rhetoric (e.g., videos, posters, and placards) and the rhetoric of performance (e.g., social activism in the form of a striptease, sticker campaigns) to put pressure on firms to join the campaign (Greenpeace, 2018). These nonverbal forms of communication constitute a powerful means of persuasion and probably contributed to convince most of the companies to join the campaign. By using these strategies and leveraging its legitimacy, Greenpeace successfully garnered the support of activists, consumers, and media. This support helped persuade the general public that companies' environmental practices violated social norms and pollution-related rules, thereby creating a



TABLE 7 Report 2016—Key events of Detox Campaign for each company during the first joining phase of the campaign 2011–2014.

Company	2011	2012	2013	2014
Inditex		<p>November: (i) Global public action against “Zara.” More than 700 people, in over 80 cities, in 20 countries around the world protested, staged street theater, and conducted “mannequin” walk-outs to demand Zara commit to eliminating the use of all hazardous chemicals throughout its supply chain. F-X December: G</p>	<p>January: X April: H</p>	<p>January: I</p>
Benetton		<p>November: F</p>	<p>January: X</p>	
H&M	<p>July: A-B August: D September: (i) Activists rebrand H&M in 12 countries attached “DETOX our water” and “DETOX the future” stickers onto local H&M shop windows! X</p>	<p>March: E November: F</p>		<p>January: I</p>
C&A	<p>November: B, X</p>	<p>November: F December: G</p>		<p>January: I</p>
Fast Retailing (Uniqlo)	<p>August: D</p>		<p>January: X</p>	
G-star	<p>August: D</p>	<p>March: E</p>	<p>January: X</p>	
Mango		<p>November: F December: X</p>		
Miroglio				<p>September: X</p>
Valentino			<p>February: X</p>	
Adidas	<p>July: A-B, • (i) striptease outside Adidas's shops worldwide August: C-D-X Greenwashing</p>	<p>March: E</p>	<p>April: H</p>	<p>January: I, • Greenpeace volunteers around the world entered Adidas stores to remind that the company is washing its hands, that it's time to stop hiding behind paper promises and commit to Detox. May: N, • Activists around the world join together to take action, asking Adidas to keep the football beautiful by eliminating hazardous chemicals. Activities took place in 10 countries and more than 35 cities. June: Greenpeace spun a hashtag #detox #allin or nothing. X (11 June) agrees to end the greenwash and return to its Detox pledge</p>

(Continues)



TABLE 7 (Continued)

Company	2011	2012	2013	2014
Burberry				January: I, <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Greenpeace supporters and customers participated in three-day social media storm on Twitter, Facebook, and Instagram to convince the brand to join Detox. Greenpeace volunteers visited Burberry stores from Beijing to Mexico City to protest, X (28 January)
Levi's		November: F December: (I) Greenpeace activists staged a vertical catwalk action on a giant red carpet banner reading "Levi's, it's Time to Detox" in front of the Levi's store in the biggest mall in Copenhagen, Denmark <ul style="list-style-type: none"> (I) "Street artists support Detox" posters and street art were promoted across the globe. In Taiwan alone, over 200 pieces of street art were put up, alongside 90 pieces of clean graffiti around eight Levi's stores (I) Activists and volunteers also took to the street in over 20 countries to take the message directly to the brand's customers and to speak with the staff working in their stores, who sent the message back to Levi's HQ, <ul style="list-style-type: none"> G, X 		
Primark				January: I February: X January: I May: N November: X, The company announced its renovated commitment to Detox. In addition to setting out a plan to eliminate PFCs from 100% of its products, it also showed how it intends to publish the discharge data of 80% of its global suppliers by the end of 2020
Puma	July: A-B-X August: D Greenwashing	March: E		
M&S		September: (I) striptease outside M&S's stores worldwide October: X November: F		
Esprit		September: (I) striptease outside Esprit's stores worldwide October: X November: F		

TABLE 7 (Continued)

Company	2011	2012	2013	2014
Victoria Secret (Limited brand)		November: F	January: X	
Li-Ning	July: A-B August: D November: X Greenwashing	March: E		January: I
Nike	July: A-B • (i) striptease outside Nike's stores worldwide August: C-D-X Greenwashing	March: E December: G		January: I May: N
Dolce & Gabbana				February: L-M
GAP	August: D	November: F December: G	April: H, Greenpeace reached out to GAP executives asking them to narrow the gap between their words and the truth when it comes to Detox. Consumers and activists around the world joined together to call on GAP to clean up its act	January: I March: GAP opened its first store in Taiwan. Activists decided to mark the occasion by reminding GAP of its unresolved toxic problems in front of the new store
Metersbonwe	July: A-B	November: F		
Calvin Klein (PVH)	July: A-B August: D	March: E November: F December: G		
Versace				February: L • Greenpeace Italia volunteers displayed a banner in the Galleria Vittorio Emanuele, during Fashion Week, calling for Detox • M

Notes: X: company commitment to achieve the target of Detox campaign until 2020. A: In the 2011 "Dirty Laundry" report, the company is denounced by Greenpeace because of the emission of hazardous chemicals by its supplier in China. THE CAMPAIGN STARTS: B: Large retail mannequins joined the 'Detox' challenge and appeared in iconic locations around the world. In addition, some people started showing their 'Detox' tattoos. C: Greenpeace launched a design competition offering everyone the chance to redesign company logos to better reflect their truly toxic practices. D: Company's products were analyzed by Greenpeace and hazardous chemicals were found in them. E: Investigation by Greenpeace showing that this brand's products release toxic substances even when washing them. F: "Toxic threads, the big fashion stitch-up"; an investigation revealing links between textile production plants using toxic chemicals and water pollution, was also extended to these companies. G: Greenpeace investigated textile production plants in Mexico (first investigation outside of China) and found a wide range of hazardous substances in the wastewater discharged from two plants. These companies have these plants as their supplier. H: An investigation revealed a relationship between the company and a polluting supplier in Indonesia, so more transparency was demanded. I: A new investigation from Greenpeace has found a wide range of hazardous chemicals in children's clothing and footwear from these companies. L: Greenpeace launched "A Little Story about a Fashionable Lie" report revealing the toxic truth behind luxury fashion, finding hazardous chemicals in the clothes of these brands. M: Greenpeace activists from Mexico to Moscow join the Naked King (protest in front of stores) to tell luxury fashion brands to commit to toxic-free fashion. They flooded these brands with online messages. N: The German division of Greenpeace published "A red card for sportswear brands" revealing the presence of a number of hazardous chemicals in the boots, gloves, and jerseys produced by these brands in the run-up to the 2014 World Cup.

legitimacy threat for those companies. Consequently, companies were more likely to respond promptly to the campaign's demands to avoid loss of reputation and meet public expectations. As a matter of fact, when the NGO organized some visual action, such as encouraging people to start showing their Detox tattoos (see letter B in Table 7) or launching a design competition offering everyone the chance to redesign company logos to better reflect their truly toxic practices (see letter C in Table 7), or promoting company-specific visual actions (see (i) in Table 7), in most cases, the targeted companies have almost immediately joined the campaign, taking the Detox 2020 commitment (indicated in Table 7 with X; see also Figure 2). Therefore, by employing these visual rhetoric and social activism strategies, Greenpeace effectively communicated its messages, mobilized support, and drove positive change for the cause.

In line with the evidence above, many studies have shown that images and videos have a strong psychological impact and constitute a powerful way to communicate a message (e.g., Boiral, 2016; Dhanani, 2019). However, prior research has focused more on the use of visuals in corporate annual reports to communicate a particular message (e.g., Boiral, 2016; Cooper & Slack, 2015; Dhanani, 2019). We know little about using nonverbal communication by stakeholders,

and even less about using nonverbal communication during interactions between companies and stakeholders, especially in the NGO context. Extant literature argues that stories often evoke emotional responses, making them more persuasive than public arguments, especially for audiences likely to react emotionally (e.g., Fisher, 1984; Hong et al., 2022). Both visual communication and rhetoric of performance leverage this aspect by using visuals and motion to instantly convey emotional messages (*pathos*) to target audiences and stakeholders (Hong et al., 2022). Therefore, by balancing emotional appeals with logical arguments and ethical credibility, the use of visual rhetoric and social activism (in the form of rhetoric of performance) could be an effective nonverbal communication strategy for NGOs to pressure companies and convince them to actively participate in a campaign. This line of reasoning brings us to formulate our first proposition:

P1. The use of visual rhetoric (e.g., videos) and the rhetoric of performance (e.g., social activism in the form of a striptease or a sticker campaign) by an NGO in the initial stages of a campaign raise the odds of attracting commitment from targeted companies.

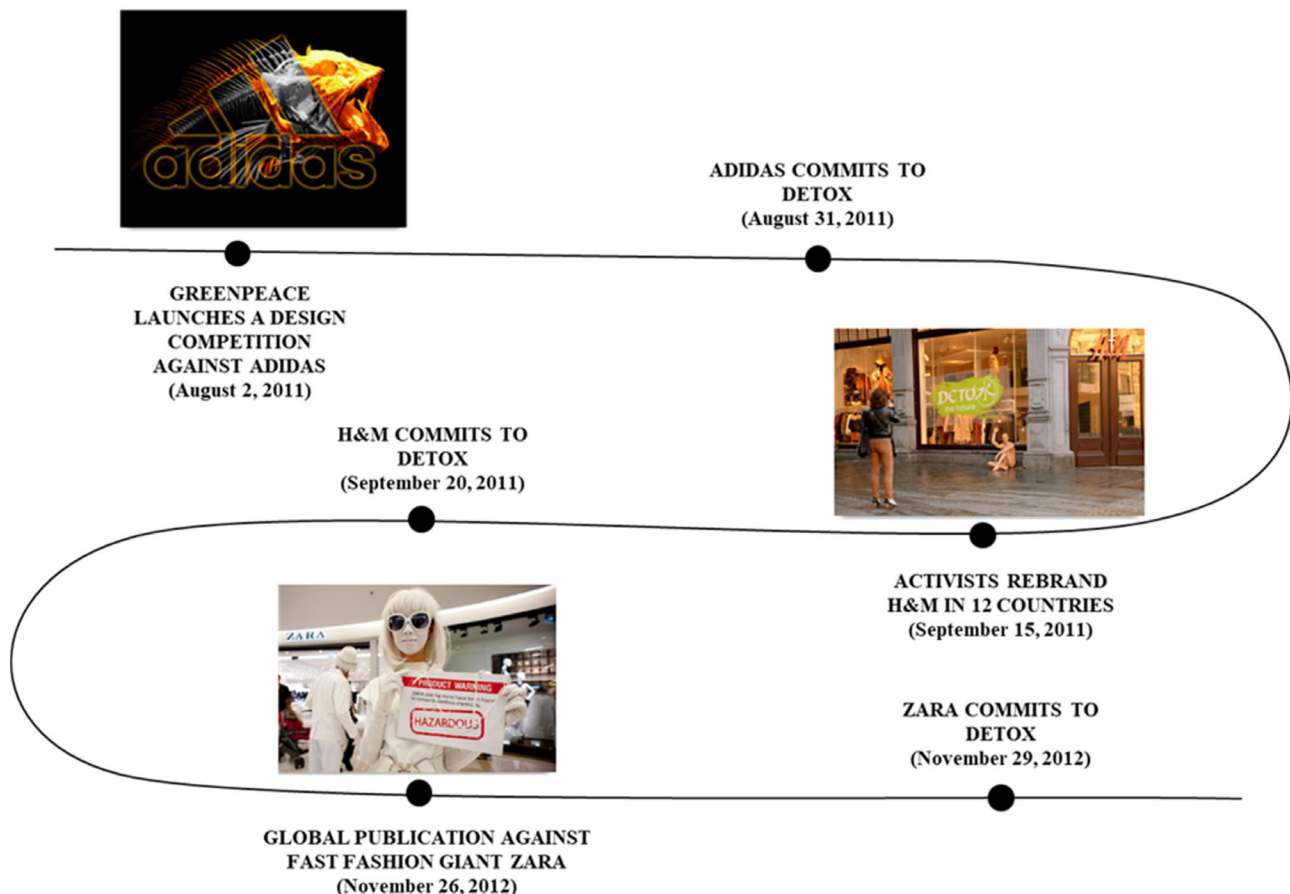


FIGURE 2 Timeline of the effects of visual rhetoric and social activism strategies adopted by Greenpeace in the first joining phase of the campaign.

5.2 | NGO-corporate relationship and company behavior

For the *Detox Catwalk 2016* (i.e., the first leg of the campaign 2011–2016), the overall assessment of the ED results for each brand, encompassing all three criteria simultaneously is reported in Table 8. The presence of three criteria simplified the construction of the overall assessment because the two-out-of-three rule was used to determine the assignment, except when the highest level across the three criteria was high and the lowest was low. For instance, in case of high-high-medium assessment in the three criteria, the overall assessment resulted high. On the other hand, in case of high-high-low, high-medium-low, and high-low-low assessments, the overall assessment resulted medium.

For the *Destination Zero 2018* (i.e., the second leg of the campaign 2016–2018), the overall assessment of the ED results for each brand, encompassing all two criteria simultaneously is reported in Table 9.

For the *Fashion Fairytale 2021* (i.e., the third leg of the campaign 2018–2021), the results are reported in Table 10.

For the second and third legs, the methodology used for the aggregate assessment of the disclosure levels was different from that employed for the first leg of the campaign, as the criteria that were used by Greenpeace were no longer three, but two. Equal levels for the two criteria (e.g., high-high) or fully in opposition (e.g., low-high) returned an unambiguous overall assessment (i.e., in the first case high, in the second case medium). Differently, for uncertain ratings (e.g., medium-high or low-medium), we preferred keeping both levels (e.g., medium-high → medium-high), as our study is qualitative, and

we are not interested in obtaining an exact score but in keeping the result more informative.

Finally, in Table 11, we summarize the aggregate disclosure level obtained by the brands in each of the three periods considered. From this table, it is easy to identify the brands that have been and keep being the most committed to dissemination of information on certain environmental practices inherent in the Detox campaign, as well as other lower-tier brands who are less concerned about ED. Table 11 shows that 14 companies out of 19 settled at a medium level in terms of ED results in the final period of the Detox campaign, irrespective of the type of relationship established with the NGO. This evidence leads us to believe that, despite the various actions carried out by Greenpeace, the behavior of those companies has not drastically changed in the long run. Also, Greenpeace wondered whether companies would keep implementing and reporting their commitment by disclosing their supply chains and publishing progress reports and wastewater data from their production facilities even without the pressure of an active Greenpeace campaign (Greenpeace, 2021). To verify this, Greenpeace did a so-called “blind check”: it simply researched and analyzed all the publicly available information on brands' websites and reports to understand what companies were doing without feeling the pressure of a global organization like Greenpeace checking on them. Many monitored brands have published a Detox progress report in 2020, but for nearly one third of them, their last dedicated Detox update was in 2019, and as far back as 2018 for Inditex, Mango, and Esprit (Greenpeace, 2021). Also, nearly one third of the brands monitored did not include detailed wastewater results or analysis in their latest report, as the issue no longer seems to be a priority for them.

TABLE 8 Assignment of the environmental disclosure level for the short-term 2011–2016.

“Detox Catwalk 2016” criteria				
Company	Detox 2020	PFC elimination	Transparency	Disclosure level
Adidas	Low	High	High	Medium
Benetton	High	Medium	Medium	Medium
Burberry	Medium	Medium	Low	Medium
C&A	Low	Medium	High	Medium
Esprit	Low	Medium	Low	Low
Fast Retailing (Uniplo)	High	High	Low	Medium
G-star	Medium	High	Low	Medium
H&M	High	Medium	Medium	Medium
Inditex	High	High	High	High
Levi's	Medium	High	High	High
Li-Ning	Low	Low	Low	Low
Limited Brands (Victoria Secret)	Low	Low	Low	Low
Mango	High	High	Low	Medium
M&S	Low	Low	Medium	Low
Miroglio	High	Low	Low	Medium
Nike	Medium	Low	Medium	Medium
Primark	Low	High	Low	Medium
Puma	Low	Low	Medium	Low
Valentino	High	High	Low	Medium

“Destination zero 2018” criteria			
Company	Chemical management	Transparency	Disclosure level
Adidas	Medium	High	Medium-high
Benetton	High	High	High
Burberry	Medium	Low	Low-medium
C&A	Low	High	Medium
Esprit	Low	Medium	Low-medium
Fast Retailing (Uniplo)	High	Medium	Medium-high
G-star	Low	High	Medium
H&M	High	Medium	Medium-high
Inditex	High	Medium	Medium-high
Levi's	Medium	High	Medium-high
Li-Ning	Low	Medium	Low-medium
Limited Brands (Victoria Secret)	Medium	Medium	Medium
Mango	High	Low	Medium
M&S	Medium	Low	Low-medium
Miroglio	High	High	High
Nike	Low	Medium	Low-medium
Primark	Medium	Medium	Medium
Puma	Low	High	Medium
Valentino	High	High	High

TABLE 9 Assignment of the environmental disclosure level for the intermediate period 2016–2018.

“Fashion fairytale 2021” criteria			
Company	All hazardous chemical	Transparency	Disclosure level
Adidas	Low	Low	Low
Benetton	Medium	Medium	Medium
Burberry	Medium	Medium	Medium
C&A	Medium	High	Medium-high
Esprit	Low	Medium	Low-medium
Fast Retailing (Uniplo)	Medium	Low	Low-medium
G-star	Medium	Medium	Medium
H&M	Medium	High	Medium-high
Inditex	High	Low	Medium
Levi's	Low	Medium	Low-medium
Li-Ning	Low	Low	Low
Limited Brands (Victoria Secret)	Low	Medium	Low-medium
Mango	High	Low	Medium
M&S	Low	Low	Low
Miroglio	Low	Low	Low
Nike	Medium	Low	Low-medium
Primark	Low	Low	Low
Puma	Medium	Medium	Medium
Valentino	High	Medium	Medium-high

TABLE 10 Assignment of the environmental disclosure level for the long-term 2018–2021.

Adopting the lens of Stakeholder Theory may be useful to understand this behavior. According to this theory, how companies choose to address sustainability concerns can be understood as a response to

demands from stakeholders (Wheeler et al., 2003). Indeed, companies consider stakeholders' sustainability expectations when deciding whether and how to adopt sustainability strategies and share ESG

TABLE 11 Aggregated assessments for short-, intermediate-, and long-term.

Company	Disclosure 2016	Disclosure 2018	Disclosure 2021
Adidas	Medium	Medium-high	Low
Benetton	Medium	High	Medium
Burberry	Medium	Low-medium	Medium
C&A	Medium	Medium	Medium-high
Esprit	Low	Low-medium	Low-medium
Fast retailing (Uniplo)	Medium	Medium-high	Low-medium
G-star	Medium	Medium	Medium
H&M	Medium	Medium-high	Medium-high
Inditex	High	Medium-high	Medium
Levi's	High	Medium-high	Low-medium
Li-Ning	Low	Low-medium	Low
Limited brands (Victoria Secret)	Low	Medium	Low-medium
Mango	Medium	Medium	Medium
M&S	Low	Low-medium	Low
Miroglio	Medium	High	Low
Nike	Medium	Low-medium	Low-medium
Primark	Medium	Medium	Low
Puma	Low	Medium	Medium
Valentino	Medium	High	Medium-high

TABLE 12 Example of the type of relationship and the level of environmental disclosure.

Relationship	Company	Short-term	Intermediate term	Long-term
Conflictual	Inditex	H	H	M
	Levi's	H	H	M
Collaborative	Mango	M	M	M
	Esprit	L	M	M
	Victoria Secret	L	M	M

content (Darnall et al., 2018; Huq et al., 2016; Tsoi, 2010). In our case, several companies probably have tended to respond in the short-medium term to NGO requests mainly for opportunistic reasons when they felt their legitimacy was more threatened by this stakeholder. In contrast, in the final period of the campaign, they assessed the ED to a medium level to show sufficient efforts and comply with current regulation and norms, with no differences driven by the type of relationship (collaborative vs. conflictual) established with the NGO. Many companies are often not really involved and interested in the environmental issues addressed; but they try to comply with the established rules and achieve the bare medium standard to achieve stability. “[...] There will always be companies that will not take any action unless they are required by regulation” (Greenpeace GCLDC). Therefore, we formulate:

P2. The quality of ED reaches a medium level in the long run, irrespective of the type of NGO-corporate relationship established.

While we observed that the quality of ED reaches a medium level in the long run irrespective of the type of relationship established with

the NGO, we also found that how this level will be reached may, in fact, depend on it. Specifically, initially higher quality of ED occurred more frequently when Greenpeace used its activists to put pressure on companies (i.e., when the NGO-corporate relationship is based on strong conflict and activism). For instance, Inditex and Levi's had a “high” level of ED in the short and medium terms of the Detox campaign (see Tables 11 and 12), settling at a medium level in the long term.

Table 7 (see letter F) also shows that both were mentioned in the report “Toxic Threads: The Big Fashion Stitch-Up” (2012), which denounces that these companies used hazardous chemicals, with about 60% of products containing the harmful chemical NPE.¹ Greenpeace tried to establish a conflictual relationship with Inditex and Levi's as both had poor environmental performance compared with other brands involved in the campaign. Precisely, Greenpeace organized several nonviolent actions mobilizing various activists. Interestingly, Table 7 (see letter F) also shows that other companies (M&S,

¹“NP/NPEs, also known as nonylphenols and nonylphenol ethoxylates, are nonionic surfactants, or detergent-like substances, with uses that lead to widespread release into aquatic environments.” (EPA).

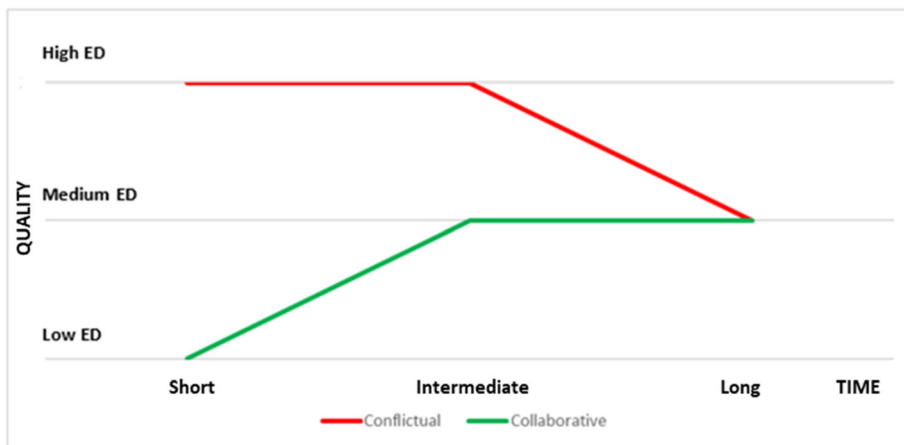


FIGURE 3 The trajectory of environmental disclosure quality over time based on the type of NGO-corporate relationship.

Esprit, and Victoria's Secret) had percentages over 50%, but in this case, Greenpeace was softer with them, managing to establish a systematic dialog. Specifically, we observed that when the type of relationship tended to be more cooperative, the trajectory was opposite to that observed in cases of conflictual relationship (see Figure 3).

In the first stage of the campaign—from 2011 to 2016—the quality of ED of brands (e.g., Victoria's Secret or Esprit), with which Greenpeace activated more dialog-based relationship, was very low (see Disclosure 2016 in Table 11), whereas at the end of the campaign the performance reached a low-medium level (see Disclosure 2021 in Table 11).

We understand that the different type of NGO-corporate relationship established leads to a different evolution of the quality of ED. The better results obtained by companies involved in a more conflictual NGO-corporate relationship in the short and medium term may be the consequence of the pressure exerted by Greenpeace to fulfill the demands of the Detox campaign. Namely, in line with the Stakeholder Theory, companies need to satisfy the demands of influential actors (Greenpeace) to avoid loss of reputation in the immediate term. As a matter of fact, the companies heavily criticized by the NGO showed a commitment to the Detox campaign after nonviolent actions carried out by the NGO, perhaps for opportunistic or competitive reasons. This is described as a *reactive* approach (Sutantoputra, 2022), where companies send a signal of involvement in the campaign and communicate a positive environmental image to their stakeholders and the society as a whole, only after feeling their legitimacy threatened. Conversely, a more collaborative relationship is likely to lead to diminished urgency of the “obligation” to produce high-quality ED immediately (i.e., in the short-medium term), since companies' main interest is to achieve the objectives for which the collaboration was established, and thus fulfill the requirements of the NGO partner more in the long run. Accordingly, we formulate:

P3. The type of NGO-corporate relationship significantly shapes the trajectory of the quality of ED. Companies establishing at first more conflictual relationship with an NGO exhibit high quality of ED in the short and medium term, settling at a medium level in the long run. In contrast, companies establishing at

first more collaborative relationship with an NGO exhibit low quality of ED in the short and medium term, settling at a medium level in the long run.

5.3 | Linking the type of NGO-corporate relationship and the risk of greenwashing

5.3.1 | Content analysis on the risk of greenwashing

The sustainability documents (e.g., SR, website) published by the “Toxic Addicted” companies were analyzed taking into the consideration the GRI standards previously selected (see Table 6). The results of this analysis are summarized in Table 13.

In detail, by analyzing D&G's documents on ESG, we believe that the strategy applied for ED on their website reveals lack of transparency, given that the information disclosed does not follow any kind of standard report guidelines, particularly the GRI standards. Regarding the company Metersbonwe, the total absence of any retrievable data on environmental practices also reveals a clear lack of transparency and traceability. On the opposite, by including GRI standards in their reports, GAP and Calvin Klein tend to exhibit high transparency and traceability, which, lend credibility and reliability to the information shared, as further documented in prior works (Adams, 2004; Ruiz-Blanco et al., 2022). In contrast, for Versace, the first sustainability report was published in 2020, but did not follow the GRI standards. Thus, in this case, the risk of greenwashing is relatively high because, in line with the view of Greenpeace GCLDC, we encountered no transparency and traceability of environmental and supply chain information that complies with GRI standards.

In the next two sections, we develop two propositions (P4 and P5) related to the risk of greenwashing practice upon SR and environmental commitment. We connect this risk to the type of communication strategies adopted by an NGO as well as to the type of relationship established during the campaign. By doing so, we address our second research questions (RQ2) focused on how NGO's communication strategy influences the participation rate of companies in the campaign and may unintentionally lead participating companies to

TABLE 13 Transparency and standardization upon companies' sustainability reports.

Company	Source	GRI 102-9	GRI 303-1	GRI 303-4	GRI 308-2	Explanation	Transparency
Dolce & Gabbana	"Code of Ethics" website section (https://world.dolcegabbana.com/corporate/code-of-ethics/)	No ESG disclosure; only a section on their website				In the dedicated section, the three most important aspects of sustainability are explored through brand ambitions and declarations. However, these statements are too meager and evanescent because they lack the support of standards or, in general, guidelines, such as the GRI.	Low
Gap	Sustainability report (https://www.gapinc.com/en-us/values/sustainability/esg-resources/past-reports-and-disclosures)	✓	✓	✓		In its sustainability reports, ESG commitments and objectives are declared. Their focus on environmental protection and the presence of a sustainable business strategy follow the GRI guidelines. They also use other standards that compensate for the absence of GRI 303-1 and 303-4. Real commitment can also be inferred by the presence of a list and related links of past sustainability reports	High
Metersbonwe	Website	No disclosure				-	Low
Calvin Klein (PVH)	Sustainability report (https://www.pvh.com/search?query=CR%20)	✓	✓	✓		In the PVH (brand group) sustainability reports, an excellent degree of detail in sustainability information shines through. The commitment, objectives, and strategies are credible and truthful, as they are consistently supported by different reporting methodologies (GRI, SASB, and TCFD). Regarding the criteria we have taken into consideration, it is evident that there is substantial transparency of information about their suppliers, thanks also to the possibility of downloading an Excel sheet containing the complete list with details on the reference level and the presence of a delineated criterion for evaluating them on environmental operations	High
Versace (Capri holding)	Sustainability report (https://www.capriholdings.com/RESPONSIBILITY/CSR-Resources/default.aspx)	Disclosure without GRIs				The first sustainability report was published in 2020, but only SASB and TCFD (not GRI) standards are integrated in the reporting methodology	Low

exhibit false commitment (proposition P4). Moreover, we address our third research question (RQ3), which examines how an everlasting conflictual NGO-corporate relationship carried out by the NGO influences the risk of greenwashing practices adopted by companies (proposition P5).

5.3.2 | Pressure by NGOs and the risk of greenwashing

When asked about possible greenwashing practices adopted by companies during the Detox campaign, Greenpeace GCLDC said: “[...] The demands of the Detox campaign, especially in the early years, were really challenging for companies: production of disclosure reports as well as case studies on the replacement of hazardous chemicals. Once a company started a negotiation with us on the level of ambition of their commitment, and we got into the technical and scientific merits of the measures to be taken in order to implement change, for them it meant accepting a challenge” (Greenpeace GCLDC). Indeed, if we focus on the first phase of the campaign 2011–2016, Greenpeace has framed its request to eliminate all hazardous chemicals as a competitive contest in the fashion industry, thus pitting companies against each other in a race to achieve this goal. Greenpeace has used the metaphors of sport and fashion (speed and success) to label the companies that adhered to its request as “winners” and “vanguard,” whereas the companies that resisted its request as “losers.” Being manufacturers of consumer goods, these companies are heavily dependent on public opinion. Greenpeace’s positive/negative labeling was aimed to influence public perception and ultimately impact on the company reputation and legitimacy. As a result, in line with the predictions of the Stakeholder Theory, 19 out of 24 companies committed to the NGO’s request.

On the one hand, the choice of launching a competitive challenge has had excellent results in terms of the participation rate in the campaign. On the other hand, classifying and assigning each company to one of the four categories (from “Avant-guard” to “Toxic addicted”) based on the obtained results, put substantial pressure on the participating companies, especially those starting from a disadvantaged position (i.e., initially lower environmental performance). As such, these companies may have been more inclined to adopt greenwashing practices to fulfill the stakeholder’s requests. This is the case of Adidas, Puma, Nike, and Li Ning, which countered Greenpeace’s call for eliminating dangerous chemicals from their supply chains by redefining the NGO’s goal as a complex and slow process that requires cooperation. Greenpeace denounced these companies for greenwashing and stalling and undertook continuous nonviolent actions by NGO activists (see Table 7) until the companies, feeling threatened by potential loss of reputation, decided to participate effectively in the campaign. Accordingly, we formulate the following proposition:

P4. More pressure by an NGO in early stages of its campaign is more likely to prompt immediate companies’ commitment, but also a higher risk of greenwashing.

Greenwashers often employ multiple strategies simultaneously, designing communication tactics aimed at maximizing rewards from stakeholders while minimizing potential punishments. The case of H&M exemplifies the dynamic nature of greenwashing, as described by Montgomery et al. (2023) in their “Model of Corporate Miscommunication.” Specifically, the so-called “Greenwashing 2.0” phase emphasizes the importance of considering the social network within which a firm’s stakeholders operate. Greenwashers often employ multiple strategies simultaneously, designing communication tactics aimed at maximizing rewards from stakeholders while minimizing potential punishments. H&M’s behavior illustrates this concept. On the one hand, H&M proved very attentive and involved in the campaign organized by Greenpeace avoiding greenwashing practices. “[...] The relationship over the years has been very positive and fruitful. They have set up a very efficient traceability system, they have demanded and obtained good levels of transparency from their suppliers, they have on the whole, always respected the deadlines for the elimination of hazardous chemicals.” (Greenpeace GCLDC). On the other hand, in the same years, H&M practiced greenwashing concerning the advertising campaign “There are no rules in fashion except one: recycle your clothes” promoted by the company itself, on which Greenpeace lashed out forcefully, as witnessed by the GCLDC: “[...] we have been very critical about their business model which in our opinion is predatory towards the planet’s limited resources. We have been very critical of their conscious line, especially, regard their take-back system for used clothes for recycling. When Greenpeace pointed out to H&M the need to reduce the disproportionate use of resources, the company responded with solemn promises, adding that technical innovations would soon enable true circularity of clothing. It sounded like an extraordinary and pioneering effort for the entire industry, yet through an investigation, some Danish journalists discovered that H&M even delivers new clothes to incinerators.” As documented by the Danish television, only in Denmark the fast-fashion giant has been dumping 12 tons of textile waste into the Roskilde incinerator every year since 2013 (Hinchcliffe, 2017). “Should we therefore expect our old T-shirts, which we bring back to H&M shops, to end up the same way?” (Greenpeace GCLDC). This evidence suggests that a firm’s commitment to specific environmental issues does not necessarily extend to other areas that are not under the direct scrutiny of NGOs or other stakeholders. Companies may strategically obtain favorable results on issues evaluated by intermediaries, such as Greenpeace in the case of the Detox campaign, while simultaneously greenwashing on other issues that are not currently under the lens of key stakeholders. This naturally poses a challenge for stakeholders (e.g., the government, the media, certifying bodies, and rating agencies) on how to coordinate their efforts and ensure that firms’ commitment for environmental improvement is real along multiple directions.

5.3.3 | Everlasting conflictual NGO-corporate relationship

Lastly, we intend to reason around the transparency and traceability of the environmental information shared by the brands that had an

everlasting conflicting NGO-corporate relationships due to their decision not to join the campaign. For clarity, they were subject to heavy activism by Greenpeace but never declared their commitment. Regarding this category of brands, the GCLDC said: "So, many companies ignored us [...]. We like to think that they have lost favor in the eyes of consumers, who trust in our organization's ratings and doubt or distrust their greenwashing advertising messages." According to our evaluation criteria based on the presence of certain GRI standards (see Section 4.2.3), the results show that three out of five companies (D&G, Versace, and Metersbonwe) did not communicate transparent environmental information regarding their supply chain. It is also noteworthy to highlight the general skepticism perceived during the interview with the GCLDC regarding the credibility of the information in the sustainability reports of all those companies that refuse to meet fundamental requirements, such as transparency and traceability, as Greenpeace demands. Moreover, a conflictual NGO-corporate relationship naturally enhances the salience of nonmarket drivers of greenwashing (in particular, NGOs, activists), creating more fertile ground for greenwashing practices (Delmas & Burbano, 2011). Indeed, a likely reaction of companies heavily accused by an NGO of lack of transparency in the short term is to fraudulently communicate positive information in their SR to change any negative perceptions of consumers and investors, and quickly regain legitimacy. In other words, stakeholder pressure can also result in firms' reactive responses where the risk of greenwashing is higher. In this context, firms may misrepresent their environmental efforts to shield themselves from external pressures, particularly in environmentally sensitive or polluting industries, such as the textile industry, (Cho & Patten, 2007). Therefore, we believe that there exists a correlation between the everlasting conflicting nature of the NGO-corporate relationship and the lack of transparency by brands that have never worked toward achieving campaign goals. Accordingly, we formulate our fifth proposition as follows:

P5. Everlasting conflictual NGO-corporate relationship raises the likelihood that companies not declaring their commitment to achieving certain environmental goals engage in greenwashing practices.

6 | DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSIONS

6.1 | Theoretical contribution

In this study, we have explored three research questions related to ED and risk of greenwashing in the context of a longitudinal campaign during which different types of NGO-corporate relationships were established. As such, the theoretical contribution of this study is twofold. First, our findings substantially extend the Stakeholder Theory and its application to ED. Previous studies (e.g., Amran et al., 2014; Eesley & Lenox, 2006) have indeed shown that environmental NGOs with a higher level of power and legitimacy are more likely to induce the targeted companies to respond positively to their requests for better transparency in ED. We add to this view by introducing the

concept that the type of relationship established between a company and a key stakeholder (NGOs) significantly shapes the trajectory over time of the quality of ED. In this regard, our results also advance the extant knowledge available in the literature on the different roles, type of relationship, and strategies adopted by NGOs and their impact on companies (e.g., Rivera-Santos & Rufin, 2010; Kourula and Halme, 2008). Specifically, if the NGO-corporate relationship is conflictual, companies tend to achieve higher ED quality in the short and intermediate terms. Vice versa, more collaborative (dialog-based) relationships result in initially low ED quality. We explain that, in line with the Stakeholder Theory, companies under the pressure of NGO activism may perceive the urgency to publicize the achievement of environmental goals by quickly releasing higher quality reports. Conversely, a collaborative relationship might lead to diminished urgency of such obligation since the company's main interest is to follow the roadmap agreed with the NGO to improve its environmental performance. However, in the long run, the type of relationship does not seem to yield differences in the quality of ED, where most companies tend to conform, settling at a medium level of ED. This is in line with the argument that, after all, companies tend to make effort just to comply with current regulation and norms, more than anything else.

Second, we enrich the literature stream focusing on the drivers that influence the risk of greenwashing (e.g., Montgomery et al., 2023; Ruiz-Blanco et al., 2022; Schons & Steinmeier, 2016), which is the focus of our second and third research questions. We first inform this literature that visual rhetoric and social activism are effective communication strategies for NGOs to pressure companies and convince them to actively participate in a campaign for environmental improvement. However, we also point out that too much pressure (e.g., the presence of a competitive challenge) put by the NGO on companies open to collaborate for environmental performance improvement may be a double-edged sword. This is because, while prompting companies' participation in the campaign, this heightened pressure can lead to the adoption of greenwashing practice, especially for initially poorer performers. Moreover, this study further confirms Montgomery et al. (2023)'s claim that firms strategically design communication tactics to maximize positive responses from stakeholders, while minimizing negative repercussions. The H&M case described in this study illustrates this dynamic. H&M pursued genuine environmental improvements in areas subject to intense scrutiny (e.g., the Greenpeace Detox campaign), while simultaneously engaging in greenwashing in other areas (e.g., recycling claims) not under current scrutiny. This example underscores the significance of considering the social network within which a firm's stakeholders operate, as highlighted in the Greenwashing 2.0 phase by Montgomery et al. (2023), which pinpoints how companies can strategically manage their environmental reputation by selectively addressing issues under direct scrutiny from influential intermediaries (such as Greenpeace) while potentially downplaying or misrepresenting other environmental concerns. Finally, we highlight that the risk of greenwashing is substantial, especially for companies not declaring their commitment to achieving certain environmental goals, and thus entertaining an everlasting conflictual relationship with NGOs.



6.2 | Managerial implications

As for managerial implications, we suggest that if NGOs want to increase companies' engagement in a campaign (e.g., short-medium term responses), they should opt for appropriate activism and implement it systematically. However, in the long run, they should act on the one hand, directly on companies, highlighting the economic benefits emerging from pursuing sustainability goals, and thus suggesting going beyond the medium standards achieved to comply with the established norms. On the other hand, NGOs should also call on governments to put more stringent rules in place for companies to improve their environmental performance because, as discussed, most firms just tend to comply.

Moreover, to prevent companies from double-crossing (i.e., they perform well on issues under direct scrutiny of NGOs, while simultaneously greenwashing on other issues not currently under the lens of key stakeholders), NGOs and other intermediaries (e.g., the government, the media, certifying bodies, and rating agencies) need to design more sophisticated campaigns that involve companies in improving their environmental performance holistically, rather than focusing on specific issues. For instance, fostering transparent communication among all stakeholder groups can help reduce the likelihood of greenwashing, as firms will be less able to provide conflicting messages to different audiences.

Finally, we urge NGOs to consider the initial gaps in the environmental performance among the companies that decide to join a campaign, given that putting too much pressure through competitive challenges may have the unintended consequence of greenwashing practice adoption. On the other hand, companies who refuse to join an NGO campaign for environmental improvement could avoid the wave of skepticism surrounding them. Instead of falling into the greenwashing trap and risking the organization's reputation, admitting possible disagreements on some issues (e.g., timetable, targets, etc.) more openly could increase credibility in the eyes of the general public.

6.3 | Limitations and future research directions

To the best of our knowledge, this is the first study that attempts to examine how the type of NGO-corporate relationship can influence corporate ED and the possible risk of greenwashing. As such there are several limitations, which however offer several opportunities for future research. First, we encourage future studies to broaden theoretical perspectives applied to ED. The propositions derived from this study can provide the starting point for further development of inductive and deductive theory, hypotheses formulation, and empirical confirmation. Second, as this study focused on one industry, more work is needed to understand how the findings might translate to other industries. Third, our data are limited to the content of an NGO's campaign (Detox of Greenpeace), the involved companies' environmental reports and other secondary data (e.g., companies' websites) and three interviews with the campaign global manager. Further developments of this research should involve interviewing

companies' representatives, to gather data and induce arguments based on their perspectives of the relationships with NGOs and its impact on their ED and risk of greenwashing. Finally, although significant efforts have been made to account for the complexities of a multi-stakeholder perspective, further studies would need to consider other key stakeholders, such as trade unions, industry associations, and regulatory agencies, besides those traditionally considered (i.e., NGOs, consumers, and investors).

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