

A SCOPING REVIEW OF GREENWASHING

by

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There has been evidence of climate change for over a century, and the impacts are becoming more intense as time goes on. There is no doubt that our Earth is suffering due to human-induced impacts, and the consequences will only become more severe if we do not begin to make drastic changes soon. Many products are made to appear environmentally friendly through aesthetic green packaging and environmental labels that indeed are only a front to the damaging effects of the lifecycle of the product. This may lead consumers who are environmentally conscious to feel urged to purchase these products because of these visible “environmental” traits, while the consumers are left unknowingly supporting a cycle of unsustainable products and behaviors. We must shift from this cycle of false claims to those of truth so that consumers may make decisions based on facts and not fear that what they see or read is simply a facade. With this, the image of being “green” is increasingly more important to society. Companies and organizations are attempting to uphold this green image to appeal to consumers with growing environmental awareness. This, however, leads to greenwashing, or when individuals or companies mislead the public into believing that a company or product is more environmentally friendly than it truly is. Greenwashing ultimately leads to a setback in the

fight against the climate crisis and reinforces harmful behavior and practices toward the environment, for the sake of companies' and individual's green image.

Through a scoping review, this research sought to define greenwashing and explore the tactics most used as well as the solutions the literature provides to combat greenwashing. It sought to be a comprehensive scoping review of greenwashing that yields a tool for researchers, policymakers, and the public to use to better understand and be educated on the topic of greenwashing as well as how to move forward in curbing the practice of greenwashing. This research answered the following research questions: 1. What criteria is used to identify greenwashing in literature found in select databases? What themes are most prevalent in the definitions of greenwashing? 2. What tactics of greenwashing have been most explored in academic literature? 3. What solutions does the literature provide to combat the practice of greenwashing?

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1. Introduction

Climate change is a growing issue, and we continue to face its effects through sea level rise, more erratic temperature changes, and natural disasters.¹ It is evident that human impact on this earth causes our environment to decline, and environmental consciousness is growing more and more each day. With the rising concern about climate change, industries are trying to adopt practices that cater to environmentally conscious consumers and green purchasing. These intentions, whether altruistic or not, have created an emerging green consumption problem: greenwashing. Greenwashing is a deceptive marketing tactic that aims to promote products as environmentally friendly when the products, brand, or company do not meet the environmental standards they claim to set.² These tactics manipulate consumers into supporting businesses with false environmental claims. Importantly, greenwashing strategies are not necessarily easy to identify – consumers may want to only purchase items that are values-aligned but end up purchasing just the opposite. These practices hurt businesses, consumer trust, the environment, and individuals' efforts to make improvements to our environment.

1.1. Why do people fall victim to greenwashing?

A big issue with greenwashing is that it does not have a distinct definition or way to identify it.³ However, in 2007, TerraChoice developed the “seven sins” of greenwashing after extensive research studying environmental claims. TerraChoice, a Canadian-based private marketing and environmental advisory firm, assists clients from diverse industries and business sectors in incorporating sustainability principles and objectives into their corporate strategies. These sins were developed to aid consumers in identifying products and companies making misleading environmental claims. The seven sins include: (1) the Sin of Hidden Trade-Off, (2) the Sin of No Proof, (3) the Sin of Vagueness, (4) the Sin of Worshiping False Labels, (5) the Sin

of Irrelevance, (6) the Sin of Lesser of Two Evils and (7) the Sin of Fibbing.⁴ All of these are methods companies use to mislead consumers into believing that their practices and products are “green.” They lead to consumers mistrusting products and ultimately set societal progress back as we continue to fight climate change.

When considering greenwashing, it is important to explore how the color green plays a role in consumer perceptions. Green is most associated with environmentally conscious practices. Therefore, when displayed on a label making claims about sustainability, consumers are urged to believe that the company utilizes practices that benefit our environment whether proven to be true or not. Brouwer identifies that customers have started to become skeptical of claims after learning about greenwashing.⁵ This further proves how greenwashing is undermining companies’ ability to make true change. It is causing consumers to feel they cannot trust labels, creating an environment where consumers do not know who to trust, or how to tell what is true from what is merely a claim.

Emotional and social values play a key role in understanding consumer purchasing habits. Consumers motivated by emotional value may choose to purchase an eco-friendly product because they feel it is the “right thing to do.”⁶ Consumers motivated by social value may choose to purchase a green product because they feel they have a moral responsibility to do so. Consumers may believe that purchasing a green product fulfills their responsibility to make an effort to improve the state of our planet.⁶

1.2. Prevalence of Greenwashing

TerraChoice did a study looking into the statistics of greenwashing, specifically in family and home products. They found that the current market has witnessed an increase of 73% in the availability of green products when compared to the figures from 2009. The overwhelming

majority of consumer products that make claims of being environmentally friendly, exceeding 95%, are guilty of at least one of the sins associated with greenwashing. However, while this vast increase in green products is hopeful, only 4.5% of those products can be classified as “sin-free,” which is a substantial rise from the mere 1% reported back in 2007.⁷

Furthermore, TerraChoice determined that 100% of toys and 99.2% of baby products surveyed are found to exhibit some form of greenwashing. Claims of products being free of BPA have surged by 577% since the 2009 Sins of Greenwashing study, with a higher prevalence of these claims observed in toys and baby products than in any other category under examination. Phthalate-free claims have seen an increase of 2,550% since 2009.⁷

Moreover, larger retail chains tend to carry a higher proportion of products that are free from these deceptive practices when compared to smaller boutique stores. Categories like building materials, construction, and office products demonstrate a greater number of products that are free from these deceptive practices compared to baby products, toys, and consumer electronics where the concept of sustainability is less developed.⁷

1.3. Corporate Social Responsibility

Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR) involves the incorporation of sustainability concerns into the company's strategic approach and maintaining an open and communicative stance with the organization's stakeholders.⁸ CSR, a multifaceted notion, is occasionally employed interchangeably with sustainability or with corporate citizenship. The sustainability report provides a way for companies and consumers to see the true impact the company has on the environment. As the direct observation of sustainability commitment may not always be apparent, the sustainability report serves as a communication tool enabling stakeholders to evaluate the company's extent of involvement in Corporate Social Responsibility. Symbolic

communication without substantial efforts toward environmental issues constitutes greenwashing.⁹

Businesses operating within environmentally sensitive industries (ESI) exhibit lower instances of greenwashing on a global, environmental, and social scale, as do companies adhering to the Global Reporting Initiative (GRI) guidelines.⁹ In contrast, companies outside ESI or not adhering to GRI guidelines have a greenwashing probability exceeding twice that of ESI or GRI-compliant companies.⁹ Additionally, companies producing sustainability reports with assurance tend to engage in less global-level greenwashing compared to those without assurance.⁹ Companies in industries characterized by close proximity and high visibility display a higher propensity for greenwashing across all levels.⁹ Furthermore, there has been a noticeable increase in the number of companies engaging in greenwashing at the global and environmental levels in recent years.⁹

1.4. Solutions to Greenwashing

Effective eco-labeling is found to play a role in reducing greenwashing; however, it does not entirely eliminate the issue.⁷ Eco-labeling is a system of labeling products to indicate that they meet certain environmental standards or have a reduced environmental impact compared to similar products. It helps consumers identify goods and services that are environmentally friendly, often focusing on areas like sustainability, energy efficiency, and the reduction of harmful chemicals or pollutants. These labels can be found on a wide range of products, from food and household items to electronics and cosmetics. Eco-labeling is designed to encourage responsible consumer behavior, incentivize companies to adopt more sustainable practices, and promote transparency in the market by providing clear and credible information about a product's environmental credentials. It is observed that among the products certified by reputable

third-party organizations, more than 30% are found to be free from the deceptive “sins” associated with greenwashing.⁷

Possible solutions to greenwashing for businesses to follow include but are not limited to presenting products and services truthfully and precisely and prioritizing the primary consumer advantages.¹⁰ Simultaneously, inform customers about efforts to make operations more environmentally friendly.¹⁰ In addition to these, as consumers, we can look out for the seven sins and other signs of corporate greenwashing. By educating ourselves and others, we can stand up to companies who engage in this harmful behavior.

1.5. Aims of the Study

1. What criteria is used to identify greenwashing in academic literature found in select databases? What themes are most prevalent in the definitions of greenwashing?
2. What tactics of greenwashing have been most explored in academic literature?
3. What solutions does the literature provide to combat the practice of greenwashing?

2. Methods

Methods were adapted from de Freitas Netto and colleagues (2020).¹¹ Their paper provides sufficient protocols for how to conduct a systematic review via the Preferred Reporting Items for Systematic Reviews and Meta-Analyses (PRISMA), whose aim is to assist authors in enhancing the quality of reporting for systematic reviews and meta-analyses.¹² While this study is not a systematic review or meta-analysis, it relies on similar methods and utilizes a scoping review approach to synthesize current literature. In using these methods, the objective was to find gaps in the literature and analyze how the literature has changed over time. A scoping review was the type of study chosen because it summarizes the research that has already been published on these topics. The scoping review allowed me to analyze how greenwashing is being discussed and draw conclusions based on other researchers' findings. A scoping review provides a rigorous way to understand the field and evidence related to these questions. It utilizes explicit methodology and is comprehensible and reproducible. It helped to identify questions and provide evidence that gave clear answers to these questions.

2.1. Search Strategy

The study adopted a focused search approach, utilizing Web of Science (<https://www.webofscience.com/>) and EBSCO Host (<https://search.ebscohost.com>). Web of Science was chosen because it helps to identify themes in a field. It allows a broad search to be done that can then be narrowed down according to the inclusion criteria. EBSCO Host was chosen because it searches academic articles in the fields of journalism, mass media, and communication. This was useful because it focused on how greenwashing is present in journalistic contexts.

The search queries included the keyword “greenwash*.” This term was chosen due to its explicit relation to the study. This term describes ways in which greenwashing is addressed and should have yielded literature aligned with my research goals. When this search string was applied, EBSCO Host revealed 111 initial publications, while Web of Science yielded 737, resulting in a total of 848 publications when both platforms were considered. The number of unique publications, excluding duplicates, was 751.

2.2. Inclusion Criteria

Articles must have met the following criteria in order to be included. Papers that focused on the concept of greenwashing, involving marketing and promoting products, services, or practices as environmentally friendly, were included. They must have contained the keyword stated above: “greenwash*.” Peer-reviewed articles were included without any constraint to the time frame. Papers must have been focused on the United States to be included in order to keep the study within a US context. If a study appeared multiple times across multiple databases, I reviewed the study as a single source, not duplicates.

2.3. Data Selection

Per de Freitas Netto et al. (2020), the data selection process consisted of two main phases. The first phase involved an analysis of the titles and abstracts of the documents, while the second phase involved an examination of the introductions and conclusions.

3. Results

Figure 1 identifies the flow of the search results, as well as points out how many articles remained following each step in the process. After conducting the searches, Web of Science yielded 737 articles while EBSCO Host yielded 111 articles. Seven hundred fifty-one articles remained after deleting duplicates between the two. Phase 1 of screening for inclusion criteria left 402 articles. Phase 2 of screening for inclusion criteria left 99 articles remaining. Therefore, 99 was the final number of articles utilized for the study. NVivo was utilized to code for qualitative data analysis.

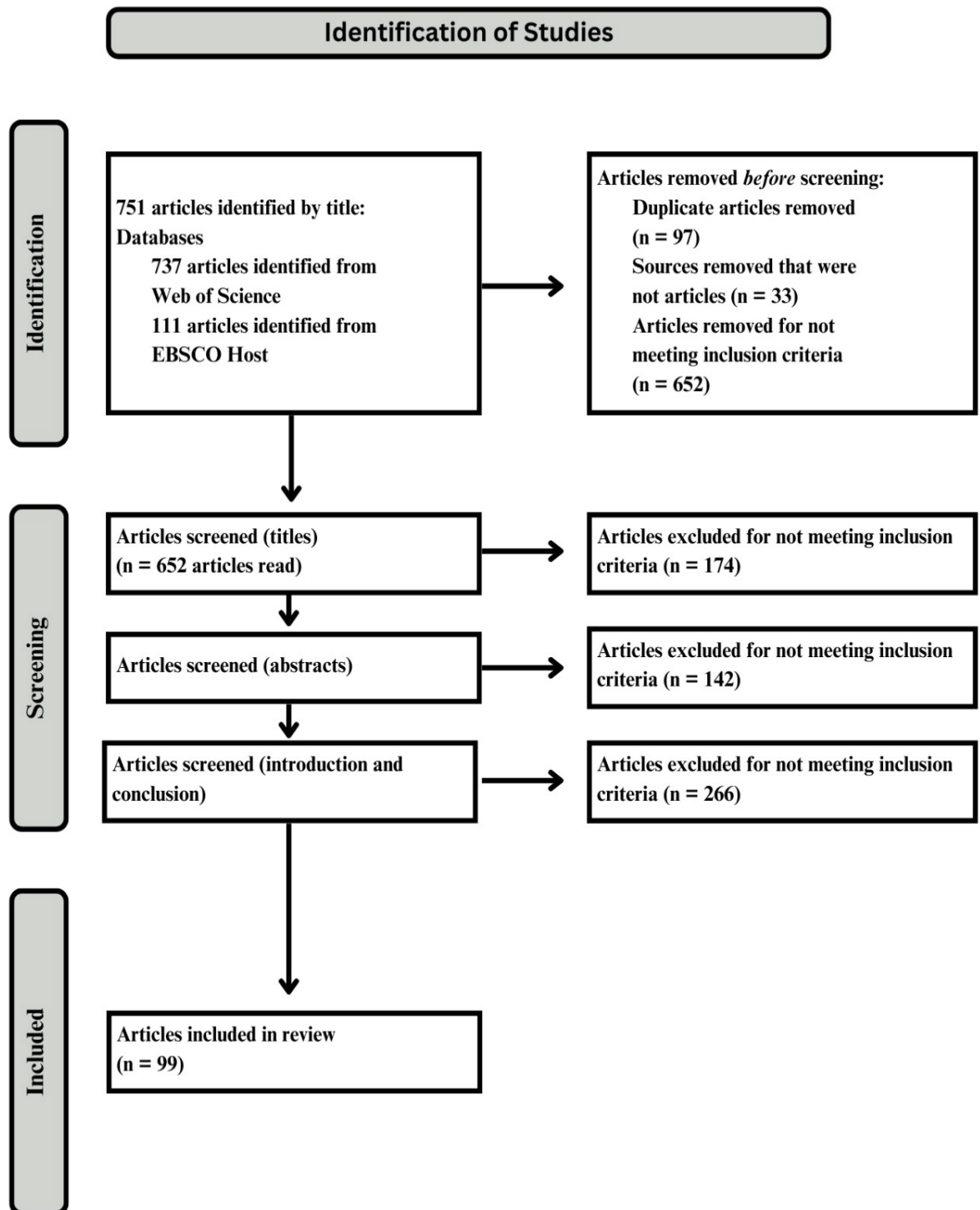


Figure 1. The process of screening the search results.

3.1. Publication Journal

Table 2 shows the name of each publication journal used. Of the 99 articles, there were 79 different publication journals. These 79 journals depict a wide range of topics and areas. “Journal of Business Ethics” was the most common journal of the articles, having 7 articles published there in this study. This business journal focuses on sustainability. It seeks to push forward the comprehension of green business strategies to improve the natural environment.¹

Table 2. Name of each publication journal.

Publication Name	Number of Documents
Journal of Business Ethics	7
Business Strategy and the Environment	4
Journal of Business Research	3
Business Horizons	3
Sustainability	2
Journal of Sustainable Finance & Investment	2
Journal of Cleaner Production	2
Organization & Environment	2
Journal of Hospitality & Tourism Research	2
International Journal of Environmental Research and Public Health	2
Review of Finance	2
California Management Review	1
Journal of Management And Governance	1
Environmental Communication-A Journal of Nature and Culture	1
Western Journal of Communication	1
Business and Society Review	1
Finance Research Letters	1
Environmental Education Research	1
Journal Of International Business Policy	1
Sustainability Accounting Management and Policy Journal	1
Sociological Perspectives	1
Journal of Industry Ecology	1
Decision Sciences	1
Local Environment	1
Journal of Economic Issues	1
Organization Science	1
International Journal of Contemporary Hospitality Management	1
Environmental Communication - A Journal of Nature and Culture	1

Columbia Law Review	1
Science of the Total Environment	1
Administrative Law Review	1
Journal of Advertising	1
International Political Sociology	1
Critical Perspectives on Accounting	1
Journal of Economics & Management Strategy	1
Environmental Humanities	1
Energy Research & Social Science	1
Ecological Economics	1
Journal of Risk and Uncertainty	1
Journal of Business and Technical Communication	1
Journal of Environmental Economics and Management	1
Journal of Green Building	1
Journal of Public Economic Theory	1
Industrial Marketing Management	1
Politics & Society	1
Review of Accounting Studies	1
European Financial Management	1
Qualitative Research in Organizations and Management	1
Journal of Business Finance & Accounting	1
Environmental Politics	1
Business & Society	1
Business History Review	1
Journal of Accounting and Public Policy	1
Psychology & Marketing	1
Corporate Social Responsibility and Environmental Management	1
Appetite	1
Journal of Regulatory Economics	1
Environmental & Resource Economics	1
Journal of Service Management	1
Quarterly Journal of Speech	1
Technological Forecasting and Social Change	1
Journal of Urban Affairs	1
Agricultural and Resource Economics Review	1
Journal of Financial Intermediation	1
Journal of International Financial Management & Accounting	1
Meditari Accountancy Research	1
Geoforum	1
International Journal of Hospitality Management	1
Production and Operations Management	1

Management Decision	1
Ecology Law Quarterly	1
Information Systems Research	1
Political Geography	1
Design and Culture	1
City & Community	1
Environment and Planning A	1
Agronomy Journal	1
International Communication Gazette	1
American Speech	1

3.2. Year of Publication

Over half of the articles were published in or after 2020. Nineteen articles were published in 2022 followed by 17 articles in 2023. Only 7 articles were published before 2010. Figure 3 illustrates the correlation of the number of articles published with the year, describing an increasing number of articles in recent years.

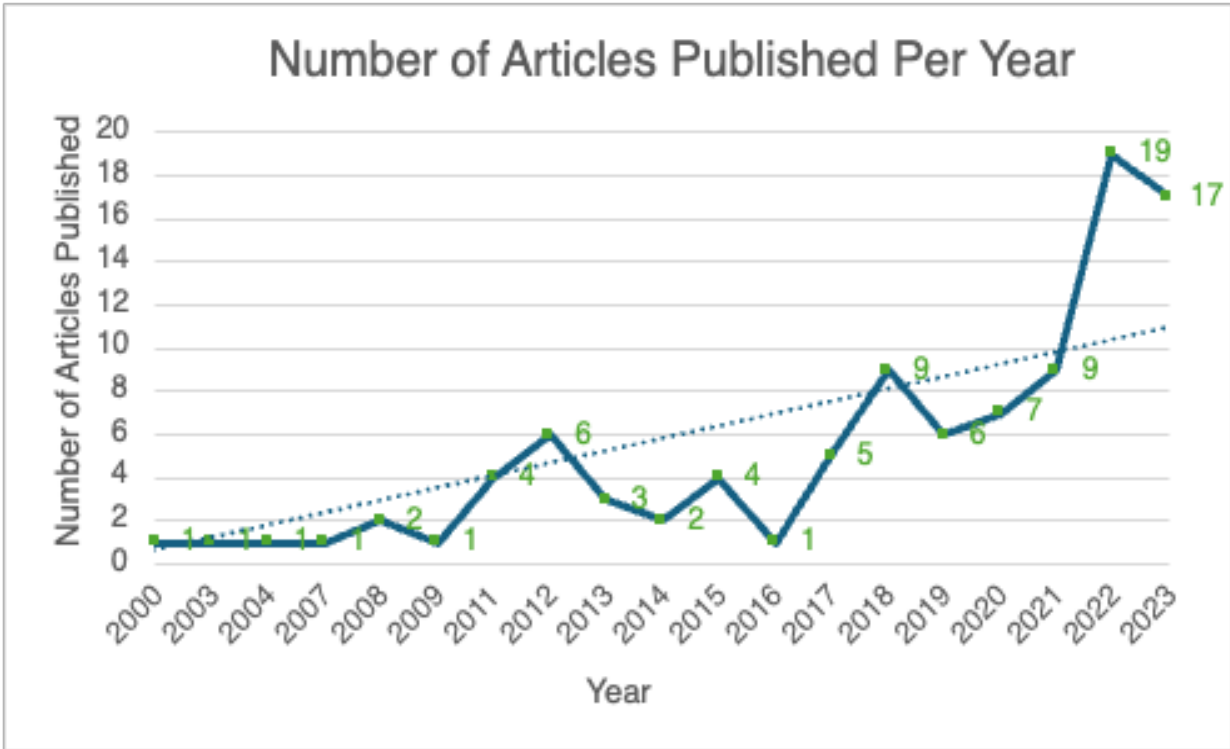


Figure 3. Articles published per year.

3.3. Coding

When analyzing each source, attention was focused on four primary areas: definitions present in the literature, which of the seven sins of greenwashing are most apparent, what solutions are offered, and whether the study was quantitative or qualitative. This study had only one coder and was coded deductively. Table 4 depicts the codebook and results of each code during the qualitative data analysis using NVivo. Of the 99 articles studied, 71 articles included a definition of greenwashing while 28 articles provided no definition. Of the 71 articles with definitions, 30 articles included multiple definitions. Twelve articles that defined greenwashing utilized the word “deceptive” or a form of it while 30 articles utilized the word “mislead” or a form of it in its definition. Fifty-two of the 99 articles offered one or multiple solutions to greenwashing. Seventy-four articles included at least one of the seven sins of greenwashing. The sin most identified in the literature was the Sin of Hidden Trade-Offs which 41 articles mentioned. The Sin of No Proof was second most prominent with 27 articles mentioning it, and the Sin of Vagueness was third most prominent with 26 articles mentioning it. Lastly, 63 articles studied the topic quantitatively while 36 articles studied it qualitatively. Quantitative studies were identified as studies that sought to answer questions that involve measurement, frequency, or numerical data. Qualitative studies were identified as studies that aim to explore phenomena, understand experiences, or provide in-depth insights into behaviors or social processes. All articles in this study were clearly identified as either quantitative or qualitative. There were no mixed-method studies.

Table 4. Coding results.

Code	Number (n)	Percentage (%)
Definition		
Present	71	71.72
“Mislead”*	33	46.48*
“Deceptive”*	12	16.9*
Multiple Definitions Provided	30	42.25*
Not Present	28	28.28
Solutions		
Present	52	52.53
Business Related	36	69.23**
Laws and Regulations	20	38.46**
Consumer Related	6	11.54**
Not Present	47	47.47
Tactics / 7 Sins of Greenwashing		
Present	74	
Sin of the Hidden Trade-Off	41	41.41
Sin of No Proof	27	27.27
Sin of Vagueness	26	26.26
Sin of Fibbing	12	12.12
Sin of Lesser Two Evils	9	9.09
Sin of Worshipping False Labels	9	9.09
Sin of Irrelevance	6	6.06
No Sins Present	25	25.25
Type of Study		
Quantitative	63	63.64
Qualitative	36	36.36
*Percentage taken from the number of articles that included a definition which is 71		
**Percentage taken from the number of articles that included a solution which is 52		

3.4. Criteria Used to Identify Greenwashing

Within each definition given in the 71 articles that provided definitions, two words were common. The words “mislead” and “deceptive” were most apparent when describing the act of greenwashing. Authors Gatti, Pizzetti and Seele write that “Greenwashing consists of strategically deceiving stakeholders regarding environmental commitment and performance, because what the firm communicates is voluntarily incongruent with its actual behaviour.”¹³ Berrone and colleagues write that greenwashing “refers to the practice of making unsubstantiated or misleading claims about a firm’s environmental impact.”¹⁴⁻¹⁷ Greenwashing can therefore be defined as *the practice of actors misleading the public regarding environmental efforts, products, and reports*. Any type of organization, business, company, government, etc. can greenwash.

3.5. Tactics Most Explored in the Literature

Of the seven sins of greenwashing, three sins were most explored in the literature. The Sin of Hidden Trade-Offs was mentioned in 41 articles. Lyon and Maxwell write,

“The Sin of the Hidden Trade-Off is committed by suggesting a product is ‘green’ based on a single environmental attribute (the recycled content of the paper, for example) or an unreasonably narrow set of attributes (recycled content and chlorine-free bleaching) without attention to other important, or perhaps more important, environmental issues (such as energy, global warming, water, and forestry impacts of paper). Such claims are not usually false but are used to paint a “greener” picture of the product than a more complete environmental analysis would support.”^{18,19}

The second most explored sin was the Sin of No Proof, which 27 articles mentioned. Darendeli, Law, and Shen write that, “Listing green skills could be a form of green advertising to

boost the firms' attractiveness to such candidates, even though the firms have no intention of stepping up their investment in green human capital."²⁰ This quote exemplifies the Sin of No Proof in which companies make environmental claims that are not backed up by actions or actual change. The third sin that was most explored was the Sin of Vagueness, which 26 articles described. One way companies may utilize the Sin of Vagueness is described by Wang, Hsieh, and Sarkis who write, "To achieve a positive corporate image and legitimate status, companies may manipulate the readability of the CSR narrative disclosure to emphasize positive CSR information and mitigate the negative impact of negative CSR information."²¹ Companies may also "feature vague statements or use imagery and colors that positively associate a brand with good environmental behavior."²²⁻²⁴

3.6. Solutions the Literature Provides

Fifty-two of the 99 articles presented some form of solutions to greenwashing. Thirty-six articles proposed business-related solutions, while 20 articles proposed laws and regulations related solutions, and six articles proposed consumer-related solutions. This leaves 47 remaining articles that offered no solutions to greenwashing.

3.6.1. Business-Related Solutions

3.6.1.1. Certifications

Another form of greenwashing can be seen through certifications which people may obtain but fail to act upon. Flowers, Matisoff and Noonan write, "In a competition to be green, each firm attempts to exceed the performance of other market participants, creating a RTT [race to the top]. However, firms sometimes participate in these programs without making substantive improvements in environmental performance."²⁵⁻²⁹ The authors go on to write, "Symbolic participation may be considered one type of greenwash, where program participants

overrepresent their environmental performance as a form of misleading communication.”²⁸⁻³⁰

One solution presented includes businesses and corporations becoming “Benefit Corporations” or “B-Corps.” “Benefit corporations promote trust among external stakeholders, who know that legally enforceable duties provide one more layer of accountability. Benefit corporations also provide corporate managers, acting in good faith, the guidance they need to reconcile the competing interests of profit-making and social benefit.”^{31,32} In line with this are initiatives like the non-profit organization, B Lab, which “through its B Impact assessment process and random on-site visits, B Lab makes sure that certified ‘B Corps’ are living up to a rigorous and comprehensive third-party standard.”^{32,33} Opposing this view of B-Corp certifications, it is argued that “Instead of complicating the law, legislators who seek to reform business practices should emphasize corporate clarification and simplification. . . .One way legislators can do this is through the promotion of constituency statutes. . . .In contrast benefit corporations add another layer of complication onto an already complicated system.”^{34,35}

Additionally, Blount and Offei-Danso argue that

“Society is better benefited by encouraging more companies to operate like those with strong CSR [Corporate Social Responsibility] than it is by creating new hybrid entities. If social entrepreneurs feel constrained within the current legal framework, the appropriate reaction is to better educate entrepreneurs about the flexibility they have within this framework to operate as a socially-minded company.”^{35,36}

LEED, or Leadership in Energy and Environmental Design, is one of many types of environmental labels an entity can obtain to boost its environmental image. According to the LEED website, “LEED certification provides a framework for healthy, highly efficient, and cost saving green buildings, which offer environmental, social and governance benefits. LEED

certification is a globally recognized symbol of sustainability achievement, and it is backed by an entire industry of committed organizations and individuals paving the way for market transformation.”³⁷ Flowers, Matisoff and Noonan discuss LEED certification in the context of RTT (Race to the Top). RTT “entails the adoption of increasingly improved standards, practices, or performance.”²⁸ The authors later write, “Our results suggest increasingly substantive adoption, in support of a RTT. Our discussion highlights how the study of green building certification dynamics contributes to literatures on self-regulation and voluntary programs.”²⁸ The LEED certification system is seen as a way to drive a race to the top in environmental standards among real estate developers. This suggests that later adopters of LEED certification are not just symbolically adopting the standards but are making increasingly substantive environmental improvements.

3.6.1.2. Corporate Social Responsibility

Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR) is a common topic when it comes to greenwashing. Kurpierz and Smith emphasize the point that greenwashing in the form of inaccurately stating a firms’ CSR should be seen as a form of fraudulent reporting. “The realization that the two are structurally similar allows the authors to better understand how CSR reporting works and how CSR reporting can be falsified. By understanding the latter, governments, firms and non-governmental organizations (NGOs) can develop tools to prevent CSR reporting from being falsified.”³⁸ Kurpierz and Smith go on to explain the *greenwashing triangle* which contains three sides of rationalization, opportunity, and pressure. According to this triangle, the authors write, “This means that to combat greenwashing, we must reduce the pressure, the opportunities or the rationalizations that lead to greenwashing.”³⁸ Ultimately, Kurpierz and Smith state that to combat greenwashing, policies need to be in place to increase

punishment for organizations caught greenwashing. “Policies that increase the punishment for organizations caught greenwashing ... would balance the pressure of ‘high reward for success’ with the pressure of ‘high penalty for cheating’. This will alter the incentive structure greenwashing organizations face and make greenwashing less attractive.”³⁸ Westerman and colleagues add that

“From an external market perspective, the crucial role of an established and consistent regulatory and monitoring context (perhaps aided by recent advancements in blockchain technology for transparency) with an audit mandate could be crucial in reducing greenwashing and advancing CSR in a meaningful way. From a within-firm perspective, by effectively aligning intra-firm structures, processes, and incentives, and through the introduction of strong ethical cultures developed by CSR-oriented leadership, training, and development, firms would more effectively retain high SDG managers capable of accomplishing CSR organizational change for meaningful long-term sustainability outcomes.”^{39,40}

3.6.1.3. Education and Transparency

Darendeli, Law and Shen created a *Green Score* which “capture[s] firms’ investment in green human capital based on the concentration of green skills required in firms’ job postings.”²⁰ *Green Score* can “capture the difference between the concurrent increases in firms’ environmental ratings and investment in green human capital. Thus, a firm that improves its environmental rating without a corresponding increase in its green human capital is likely to engage in greenwashing.”²⁰

Another way in which businesses can combat greenwashing is through education. Mishra and Schmidt write about how leaders can use information and language to be clear in defining their environmental efforts. They write,

“Clearly defining the philosophy of how the organization will balance environmental, social, and economic good is also beneficial. Organizations are often seen as hypocritical or engaging in greenwashing because when different values come into conflict, decisions are made favoring initiatives that some employees or some in the public might not prefer. It is important for firms to make clear how various aspects of the organization’s goals interact with each other and which parts of the CSR vision are action focused and which are more future aspiration focused.”^{41, 42}

Schmuck, Matthes and Naderer point out some specific examples of how education can be implemented to benefit the public. The authors write, “To that end, additional information (e.g., via comparison tools or QR codes) and interactive tools (e.g., smartphone apps) that help consumers expand their capacity to identify misleading advertising claims could be useful.”⁴³

In addition, Mishra and Schmidt describe executive symbolism. “Executive symbolism is the idea that actions of top leaders can have significant symbolic significance beyond the action itself, signaling important information to employees. Top leaders can greatly impact workers’ perceptions of an idea or initiative through leader actions.”^{44, 42} In addition, Eng and colleagues explain an additional tactic businesses may employ to increase awareness of greenwashing, termed *greenwashing literacy*. “We define greenwashing literacy as educational strategies (formal and/or informal) that can empower consumers to recognize and think critically about greenwashing messages.”⁴⁵ Siano, Vollero, and colleagues emphasize the importance of trust between managers and employees. They write that,

“...The appropriate training of people in charge of sustainability management, the involvement of organizational members in defining the corporate sustainability agenda, would be useful countermeasures to tackle the emergence of greenwashing. These actions could also foster dialogue and interactions with stakeholders which are necessary to properly mediate and contextualize CSR texts.”^{46,47}

Delmas and Burbano study how firms can take actions to decrease the likelihood of greenwashing. The researchers find that by increasing firms’ transparency about their environmental efforts and practices, the incentive to greenwash decreases. “Such transparency could be achieved through both mandated and voluntary corporate disclosure of firm-level environmental performance, and policymakers, NGOs, and managers should play central roles in such an endeavor.”⁴⁸

3.6.2. Sustainable Development Goals

The United Nations describes 17 Sustainable Development Goals (SDG’s) which aim to “provide a shared blueprint for peace and prosperity for people and the planet, now and into the future.”⁴⁹ Lashitew writes that,

“The SDGs provide an effective framework for communication across diverse stakeholders, thus serving as shared lingo that facilitates discourse and collaboration across sectors. In particular, the SDGs enable corporations to communicate their social and environmental performance in a language that is broadly understood by governments, regulators, and the media. Finally, the SDGs are specific and actionable, which makes them useful for tracking performance through concrete indicators.”^{50, 51, 52}

3.6.3. Industry-Specific Solutions

Bernard, Rahman and Douglas propose solutions for the hotel industry. For example, when green initiatives are advertised, the authors write that “It is recommended that hoteliers and marketing managers audit the content and linguistic design of their environmental messages (whether written, graphic, or implied) prior to launch to ensure that they highlight the limitations and trade-offs of the hotels’ environmental initiatives and avoid sweeping statements.”⁵³ It is added that environmental efforts should be evaluated for effectiveness often, to gauge how they can benefit guests in the long run. Educators should be involved if needed, as well.⁵³ Chen, Bernard, and Rahman write that in hotels that utilize green initiatives, it is paramount to explain how those green initiatives induce environmental effort and change. These researchers write that “Practitioners therefore should educate consumers about their green practices by disclosing the effectiveness of those practices in protecting the environment and the rationale behind having them as part of the hotel's environmental management program.”⁵⁴

3.6.4. Laws and Regulations

Lee and Cruz suggest that “instead of regulating greenwashing, policy makers should raise the level of awareness and information possessed by consumers in the market (i.e., the “informedness” of the market) and reduce the cost of the environmental practice of the firms.”⁵⁵ In another article, Huang, Francoeur and Brammer point out that greenwashing “can be curbed by adopting sound environmental governance mechanisms aimed at improving corporate transparency and environmental practices.”¹⁴ Gregory adds that “government intervention, through the form of taxes can play a role in making greenwashing a less viable strategy for firms by lessening the returns to greenwashing.”⁵⁶

3.6.5. Consumer Related Solutions

An example of how consumers may increase their own informedness and awareness of greenwashing is by utilizing platforms such as Greenwashingindex.com. This website “provides a platform for the market to evaluate whether the ads are greenwashing the audience.”⁵⁵ Sterbenk and colleagues add that “Ultimately, however, the public holds companies accountable for the statements made in their advertisements and avidly uses social media to discuss brands and their decisions to communicate about social issues.”^{57, 24} Nyilasy, Gangadharbatla and Paladino add that, “Therefore, accurate consumer intelligence on environmentally related attributions is critical under all scenarios.”⁵⁸

3.6.5.1. Community and City Initiatives

Authors Hanson-Rasmussen and Opall write about a specific measure a town has made to combat greenwashing. The Marion Falls Chamber of Commerce has created a green initiative to promote sustainability in the town. The goal of the program is to “promote the interest of businesses that are committed and engaged in environmentally responsible operations and practices, also known as green business practices.”^{59, 60} The green initiative “provides business recognition on the chamber’s website as well as marketing materials, collects and processes applications, and sponsors educational programs. The initiative is voluntary and currently has 65 businesses listed as participating.”⁶⁰ Chambers of commerce can enhance their communities by harnessing the shared sustainability goals of their members through green initiatives.^{60,61}

4. Discussion

Greenwashing is something that we all, as humans and members of communities, are susceptible to. It is important to be aware of it so that we may combat it in hopes of reaching honest sustainability goals.

4.1. Publication Journal

With various publication journals with diverse topics of focus, greenwashing proves to be a phenomenon that impacts all sectors of life. From business to advertising, the automotive industry, the agricultural industry, and more, the interdisciplinary nature of this issue is evident.

4.2. Year of Publication

52.53% of the articles were published in 2020 or after. This conveys that greenwashing has been talked about more and more in recent years in academic literature. It is growing as a topic of conversation and as an area of research. The positive trend line in Figure 3 displays that greenwashing is growing as an area of interest and research, showing that researchers' concern for climate change has been steadily increasing. This proves that more and more people are noticing the urgency of taking responsibility in the climate crisis which will lead to more actionable items and solutions to curb the consequences our planet is facing.

4.3. Coding

The coding results describe the need for more qualitative research on greenwashing. With only 36.36% of the articles being qualitative, this describes the quantitative context in which greenwashing is studied. Qualitative studies should therefore increase in the database of articles on greenwashing so that there is a more even spread between the two types of studies. Quantitative studies provide a way of measurement for an area of concern while qualitative studies dive deeper into the meaning behind a topic of study. Qualitative studies provide insights into the “why” and “how” behind behavior and experience, offering context and understanding

that quantitative data alone cannot capture. This explains the importance of having both qualitative and quantitative studies surrounding greenwashing so that we may have a more well-rounded understanding of the topic.

4.4. Defining Greenwashing

Greenwashing is a topic that does not have one distinct, agreed-upon, definition. Each author describes greenwashing differently. One of the themes between them all, however, can be seen in the language used. 28 of the articles included in this study did not include a definition at all. Of the 71 articles that did include a definition of greenwashing, two words were the most common. Thirty-three articles used the word “mislead” in their definitions while 12 articles used the word “deceptive.” The Oxford English Dictionary defines the word “mislead” as “cause (someone) to have a wrong idea or impression about someone or something.”⁶² The Oxford English Dictionary defines the root word of deceptive, “deceive,” as “(of a person) cause (someone) to believe something that is not true, typically in order to gain some personal advantage.”⁶³ While these words can be used synonymously, it is important to note their differences. One difference we can note is intentionality. In the word “deceive” more intentionality is implied than the word “mislead.” The word “mislead” refers more to unsubstantiated claims but does not imply intentionality as much. In the context of greenwashing, actors who greenwash may not be conscious as a whole, but the actions leading up to the greenwashing are ultimately what result in the claims that are called greenwashing. The word mislead therefore describes greenwashing more than the word deceive, as the actors who are greenwashing may or may not be conscious of it. When discussing a definition of greenwashing, it is also important to consider all who take part in behaviors that ultimately lead to greenwashing. Greenwashing can be done by anyone, and to anyone. It is not limited to

businesses, corporations, organizations or other types of for-or non-profit groups. But the most important thing to recognize when defining greenwashing is what the actions are relating to. Greenwashing relates to environmental claims and efforts. This can include claims regarding sustainability, the origin of a product, the lifecycle of the product, the certifications the person(s) making the claims have or claims to have, etc. With this, the definition I believe best describes greenwashing is *the practice of actors misleading the public regarding environmental efforts and reports*. The results point out that in order to most clearly be able to identify and resist greenwashing, a definition needs to be agreed upon.

4.5. Tactics Most Explored in the Literature

The findings show that three of the Sins of Greenwashing are most apparent in the literature. The Sin of Hidden Trade-Off occurred in 41 articles, the Sin of No Proof occurred in 27 articles, and the Sin of Vagueness occurred in 26 articles. These three sins have received more attention than others. This could be due to these sins being easier to identify than others as well as most prevalent in environmental claims. For example, the Hidden Trade-Off is often discussed because it highlights how companies may emphasize a single green attribute of a product while failing to recognize other significant negative environmental impacts. This sin is particularly salient in industries like energy, where a product may be promoted as clean despite its production process being environmentally damaging in other ways. The Sin of No Proof is another area that has frequently been explored, likely due to its relevance in evaluating the authenticity of environmental claims. The challenge of verifying corporate claims without substantial evidence or third-party certification has become a critical issue. One way to combat this can be seen through CSR in which sustainability is incorporated into the overall approach of a business or

entity.⁸ Altogether, this reflects a broader concern about transparency in corporate sustainability reporting.

Conversely, the results suggest that the other four sins (Sin of Fibbing, Sin of Lesser Two Evils, Sin of Worshipping False Labels, Sin of Irrelevance) are less frequently explored in the literature. This gap may be due to the perceived complexity or subtlety of these sins, which may not be as immediately obvious or as easy to identify as others. For example, the Sin of Irrelevance involves making claims that, while true, are not beneficial or meaningful to consumers or the environment, which may be more difficult to detect and critique. The lack of attention to these areas points to an opportunity for future research. Investigating these lesser explored sins could provide a more comprehensive understanding of how greenwashing manifests across different sectors and contexts. For example, exploring the Sin of Worshipping False Labels could shed light on the impact of unverified or self-made eco-labels which can mislead consumers and undermine genuine sustainability efforts.

4.6. Solutions the Literature Provides

4.6.1. Business-Related Solutions: The Role of Certifications and Corporate Structures

A significant portion of the literature focuses on business-related solutions to greenwashing, particularly the role of certifications and the adoption of corporate structures like Benefit Corporations (B-Corps). The emphasis on certifications, such as LEED, reflects a broader trend in which firms seek to signal their environmental commitment through third-party verification. However, the literature also warns of the risks associated with these certifications, as firms may engage in “symbolic participation,” where they obtain certifications without making substantive improvements. As Flowers, Matisoff and Noonan highlight, this type of participation is a form of greenwashing that misleads stakeholders about a company’s true

environmental performance.²⁸ The concept of Benefit Corporations emerges as another business-related solution, designed to embed social and environmental responsibilities into the legal framework of companies. While some scholars advocate for B-Corps as a way to enforce accountability and align business practices with sustainability goals, others argue that this approach complicates the legal landscape without necessarily improving corporate behavior.³² This debate underscores the need for clarity and simplification in corporate governance to prevent greenwashing.²⁸ The reliance on certifications and specific corporate structures suggests that while these tools can enhance transparency and accountability, they also require rigorous enforcement and continuous improvement to avoid becoming mere symbols of sustainability without substantive impact.

4.6.1.2. Enhancing Transparency and Accountability

Twenty articles in the reviewed literature proposed solutions rooted in laws and regulations. These solutions are primarily concerned with increasing corporate transparency and enhancing environmental governance. The literature suggests that regulatory frameworks can play a critical role in reducing greenwashing by mandating disclosure and implementing stricter auditing processes. For instance, Delmas and Burbano argue that increased transparency can reduce the incentives for firms to engage in greenwashing, as public scrutiny becomes a more significant factor in corporate decision-making.⁴⁸ Moreover, some scholars advocate for innovative regulatory mechanisms, such as environmental taxes, to make greenwashing a less attractive strategy. By altering the economic calculus of firms, these policies can help align corporate incentives with genuine sustainability practices. However, the effectiveness of regulatory solutions depends on the willingness of governments to enforce these measures and the ability of regulatory bodies to adapt to evolving greenwashing tactics.

4.6.2. Consumer-Related Solutions

Consumer-related solutions, though less frequently discussed in the literature, offer a crucial perspective on combating greenwashing. The reviewed articles suggest that educating consumers and enhancing their ability to recognize misleading environmental claims are essential steps in holding companies accountable. Tools such as Greenwashingindex.com and the use of social media platforms empower consumers to critically assess corporate claims and share their evaluations with broader audiences.^{57, 24} Resources like these provide an opportunity for consumers to learn more about greenwashing so that they may avoid supporting companies whose environmental efforts are not reflective of true environmental improvements.²⁴ It is important for consumers to be able to recognize when a company or person is attempting to greenwash its products and practices so that consumers are given the chance to support it or not, and their decisions are based off of facts not misleading information.

The concept of “greenwashing literacy,” as discussed by Eng and colleagues, emphasizes the importance of equipping consumers with the knowledge to identify and critique greenwashing.⁴⁵ This approach suggests that informed consumers can exert pressure on companies to adopt more transparent and authentic sustainability practices. However, for these consumer-related solutions to be effective, they must be widely accessible and integrated into broader public education initiatives.

4.7. Gaps in the Literature

While the literature provides a range of solutions to greenwashing, there are notable gaps that warrant further exploration. For instance, the relatively low emphasis on consumer-related solutions suggests a need for more research on how consumer behavior can be influenced to combat greenwashing effectively. Additionally, the split between business-related and regulatory

solutions indicates that a more integrated approach may be necessary. Combining robust regulatory frameworks with corporate incentives and consumer education could create a more comprehensive strategy to address greenwashing. Furthermore, the literature often treats these solutions as distinct categories, yet there is significant potential for cross-sector collaboration. For example, businesses could work with regulators to develop more transparent reporting standards, while also engaging with consumers through education campaigns. Such an integrated approach could enhance the effectiveness of individual solutions and create a more cohesive response to greenwashing.

4.8. Limitations and Strengths

One limitation of this scoping review is the scope and selection of literature. While I aimed to capture a broad range of articles on greenwashing, the focus on specific databases and search terms may have led to the exclusion of relevant studies that may have indirectly used the term “greenwashing.” This could result in a selection bias that limits the comprehensiveness of this review. Another limitation lies in the variability in the depth of analysis across articles. Not all the studies provided explicit solutions or explored greenwashing with the same rigor. This could impact the conclusions drawn about the prevalence and effectiveness of different solutions. Some articles offered only general recommendations without in-depth analysis or empirical evidence, therefore limiting their applicability. Further, the geographical concentration of limiting the study to the United States excludes all data from other countries which could provide a more robust analysis of the topic of greenwashing. Greenwashing is an issue that occurs worldwide, so including other countries in future studies could yield different perspectives and findings. This study also did not assess the real-world impacts or success rates of the solutions found. As a result, there is limited understanding of how the solutions found can work in practice or the extent to which they can mitigate greenwashing. Only two databases

were used which can limit the scope of the research and miss potentially useful information from other databases. There was also only one researcher and coder which means there was no cross checking in the process which could have decreased the potential for errors in coding and analysis.

Despite these limitations, many strengths are also present in this study. Firstly, this study took a comprehensive approach to studying greenwashing. By examining a wide range of literature, and looking at definitions, tactics, and solutions, this review offers a holistic understanding of the different strategies proposed in the literature. This provides a strong foundation for future research to build upon and offers practical insights for those involved in sustainability initiatives. Additionally, this review contributes to the field by highlighting underexplored areas of greenwashing research. Not much research has focused on how greenwashing is defined nor the tactics most utilized. This opens new avenues for scholarly investigation, particularly in how these aspects of greenwashing can be more effectively addressed in future studies and policy frameworks.

5. Conclusions

Greenwashing is a term used to describe the spread of false claims relating to sustainability and environmental consciousness. Companies use it as a tactic to make themselves appear green, when in reality their claims are not backed up by true environmentally friendly practices. It causes mistrust in consumers and leaves them skeptical, unable to easily determine if a claim is false. Greenwashing can be identified through the seven sins, and most greenwashing claims utilize at least one of the sins. The seven sins are useful when studying greenwashing and provide a simpler way of detecting greenwashing. Greenwashing is a prevalent issue in marketing and corporate responsibility landscapes. As consumers continue to demand greater transparency in environmental claims, researchers, policymakers, and businesses must work together to address the challenges and consequences associated with greenwashing. Future research can explore evolving consumer attitudes, innovative corporate practices, and the effectiveness of regulatory measures in combating climate change.

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Appendix

Studies in Scoping Review

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