Publicwashing in Education: Definition, Motives, and Manifestations

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This essay coins and conceptualizes the term “publicwashing.” In educational systems and organizations, publicwashing is a symbolic communication that emphasizes organizational publicness for the purpose of a superficial repair of reputation. The essay defines publicwashing and describes its motives and manifestations. Additionally, it illustrates publicwashing by discussing the concept in the context of the U.S. charter school reform. Adopting the lens of symbolic communication in the charter school case illustrates how the discrepancy between the “public” label and private characteristics of charter schools is managed through public relations. Future studies of publicwashing in education can further apply the symbolic communication approach to various cases, contexts, and deceptive strategies.

Keywords: educational policy; organization theory/change; policy analysis; private education

Introduction

In the second half of the 20th and the first decades of the 21st century, privatization in education has become a global trend, embraced by many countries in the developed and developing regions of the world (Verger et al., 2016). Scholars do not regard privatization in education as a unified policy because it has many different manifestations. It has been suggested that at the heart of all these manifestations stand private actors who are active in state education in areas such as funding, planning, management, service provision, training, and more (Verger et al., 2016; Zancajo et al., 2021). Numerous studies explored the positive and negative externalities of the various manifestations of privatization in education and the reactions they elicit in the public, professional, and political arenas (Rizvi, 2016).

The public–private nexus in education is considered to be controversial: while some see public and private goals as closely related, others see public and private interests as conflicting (Levin, 2003). Despite the emerging controversies, the public–private distinction still has significant consequences in education policy and law (Green et al., 2013; Superfine & Woo, 2018), as well as political implications (Gerrard et al., 2017; Lubinski, 2001).

The dialectic nature of the relations between public education and privatization has received ample attention in several respects: formalist, structural, functionalist-goal-oriented, and network. The formalist perspective illuminates how legal and administrative control of the state is a crucial element of public education (Miron, 2008). The structural perspective illuminates how hybrid organizational forms that mix “old” public organizational elements with “new” private organizational ones (e.g., managerial autonomy, selective enrollment, use of private funds, etc.) are created (Ball, 2012). The functionalist-goal-oriented perspective illuminates the most effective way to promote “public” educational goals, and often concludes that the best way is through privately owned and operated schools (Hill, 2001). The network perspective illuminates public–private partnerships and their outcomes in the local, national, and global arenas (Kolleck & Yemini, 2019).

To date, however, the literature has not addressed the dialectic relations between publicness and privatization in educational organizations. Specifically, these relations have not been examined through the lens of symbolic communication, organizational reputation, and impression management. We seek to shed light on one important practice that we termed “publicwashing,” as part of the symbolic communication of public–private relationships in education.

The idea that organizations conduct “subject” washing has been widely discussed in research and practice. Among the most debated washing practices in organizations are greenwashing.

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pinkwashing, and whitewashing. Greenwashing is defined as “disinformation disseminated by an organization to present an environmentally responsible public image” (Concise Oxford English Dictionary cited at Du, 2015, p. 548). Pinkwashing is “a term used to describe the activities of companies and groups that position themselves as leaders in the struggle to eradicate breast cancer while engaging in practices that may be contributing to rising rates of the disease” (Malkan, 2007, p. 75).

Whitewashing describes representing crimes as less severe than they are or reframing them as moral acts by manipulative presentation of data, for example, in the context of corporate white-collar crime (Huisman, 2011). In all usages, the practice aims to convey to the external and internal audience of the organization that it has assumed a new active and meaningful commitment to promote a favorite social agenda (Delmas & Burbano, 2011). It has been suggested that “washing” practices are connected to the “discrepancy between ‘responsible words’ and ‘irresponsible walks’” (Pizzetti et al., 2019, p. 21).

This article conceptualizes the idea of publicwashing in educational systems and organizations as a symbolic communication of actors that emphasizes organizational publicness as a superficial repair of reputation (Rhee & Kim, 2012). Publicwashing is an attempt to influence stakeholders’ negative views of an organization as supporting or allowing privatization. It is not an honest attempt to strengthen organizational publicness, however, but a shallow effort of impression management that involves concealing the true conduct of an organization that supports privatization.

The article proceeds as follows. First, we present the theoretical underpinnings of the concept, that is, dramaturgy and decoupling. Second, we define publicwashing and describe the driving motives behind it and its common tactics. The next section focuses on publicwashing in education, using the case of the charter school reform and showing how charter school advocates use the label “public schools” as a tool to repair the reputational costs of facilitating privatization. The case illustrates the relevance of the communicative paradigm to the exploration of public/private relations in education. We conclude with reflections on the importance of research on publicwashing in education and in other fields, and on possible future directions.

The Theoretical Roots of Publicwashing: Between Dramaturgy and Decoupling

The first theoretical root of publicwashing is dramaturgy. We often anthropomorphize organizations and think about them as independent entities. This is justified by the fact that their conduct is the product of human actors. Therefore, Goffman’s dramaturgical theory of interaction is vital in understanding symbolic communication of and about organizations. According to Goffman (1959), social actions are intended to be viewed by others and to shape positive image of the actors. Yet, total control of impression-oriented behaviors is difficult; therefore, actors try to separate front stage performance from backstage behaviors (Goffman, 1959). Front stage performance is intentionally “monitored,” as the actor follows the conventions that have meaning for the audience. Such performance often involves interactions in public or professional settings. Backstage is “a place, relative to a given performance, where the impression fostered by the performance is knowingly contradicted as a matter of course” (Goffman, 1959, p. 112). Backstage behaviors occur in a safe space, out of sight of a particular audience, and therefore actors are more relaxed and feel safe to reveal facts and actions previously concealed. Front stage performance is not always impeccable, as it often involves two types of expression (Goffman, 1959): (a) intended direct expressions of actors that are based on shared meanings with the audience (signs given); and (b) indirect expressions of actors that are more ambiguous and are interpreted as less purposeful (signs given off). Often these indirect expressions reveal the inconsistencies in the actors’ front stage performance.

The second theoretical root of publicwashing is organizational decoupling. Meyer and Rowan (1977) suggested that organizations decouple their practices from their formal structure to facilitate coping with institutional pressures. Decoupling is manifested in superficial compliance of organizations with the requirements of institutional pressure, without implementing meaningful changes (Boxenbaum & Jonsson, 2017; Meyer & Rowan, 1977). It reflects ceremonial conformity to institutionalized myths, which helps organizations gain legitimacy in the eyes of external actors and increase their survival prospects (Meyer & Rowan, 1977). The effectiveness of loosely coupled organizations relies on the “logic of confidence and good faith” (Meyer & Rowan, 1977, p. 357), namely, on public trust that the stated intentions of the organization are realized in practice. Organizations using a decoupling strategy assume that they can avoid close inspection and often take active steps to avoid such inspection (Boxenbaum & Jonsson, 2017).

Publicwashing: Definition

Delmas and Burbano (2011) argued that organizational “subject” washing is characterized by two concurrent behaviors: poor subject performance and positive communication about it. In our attempt to define publicwashing, we delved deeper into core elements in definitions of publicness of organizations, and into various types of washing in organizations (specifically, greenwashing, pinkwashing, and whitewashing).

In discussing the publicness of organizations, we must adopt a dimensional approach to publicness. Unlike the binary approach to classifying organizations into public and private, the dimensional approach perceives the distinction between public and private organizations as fluid: “[I]t is a matter of degree; publicness is both a behavioural category, not a legal one and multi-dimensional. The advantage of this approach is that it handles all organizations, not just pure types” (Antonsen & Jørgensen, 1997, p. 338).

Definitions of publicness show two chief signal elements of the concept. First, some of the definitions identify the fundamental influences of political authority (i.e., an actor with legitimate public power to set rules or an agenda, and to use public resources) and public ideals (e.g., increased access, sustainability) on organizational structures, processes, and outcomes (e.g., Merritt et al., 2018; Miller & Moulton, 2014; Moulton, 2009; Walker & Bozeman, 2011). For example, some private foundations in education can be perceived as “more public” by
supporting democratic state regulations and policies. Others may promote their founders’ political and economic agendas by leveraging their influence to change these regulations and policies (Verger, 2019), the conduct of which can be viewed as “less public.” Second, the various dimensional definitions of publicness highlight several domains in which publicness can manifest, of which the literature names organizational ownership, goals, resources, funding, control, operations, and management (e.g., Goldstein & Naor, 2005; Heinrich & Fournier, 2004; Merritt et al., 2018; Miller & Moulton, 2014). For example, nongovernmental organizations (NGOs) providing educational services contingent on a symbolic participation fee may be considered more public than NGOs using a matching funding method that denies access to disadvantaged communities (Berkovich & Foldes, 2012; Sleegers, 2019). Based on the above, we define publicness as follows:

Publicness is the extent to which political authority and public ideals shape organizational structures, processes, and outcomes in such domains as ownership, goals, resources, funding, control, operations, and management.²

The various definitions of washing in the organizational domain (i.e., greenwashing, pinkwashing, and whitewashing) diverge. We selected repeated relevant aspects that are key characteristics of the phenomenon to formulate our own definition of washing. First, all definitions stress that communicative action of actors involves various degrees of misinformation. Terms such as “uncertain, erroneous, or incomplete information”; “misleading”; “deceiving”; “symbolically”; “disinformation”; “to obscure the truth”; “false information”; and “false claims” appear in all the definitions we encountered (e.g., Baum, 2012; Nyilasy et al., 2014; Roulet & Touboul, 2015; Shabbir Husain & Varshney, 2019; Topal et al., 2020). Second, the idea that this misinformation is intentional has surfaced in many definitions and the verbs used, and some definitions (e.g., Roulet & Touboul, 2015) stated it directly, suggesting that the organization is “giving priority” to misinformation over the alternative action path that mandates investing considerable efforts and resources. Third, the subject at the heart of washing is one with social relevance that “benefits” or “impacts” society (e.g., Baum, 2012; Nyilasy et al., 2014; Shabbir Husain & Varshney, 2019). Fourth, whereas several forms of washing (e.g., greenwashing, pinkwashing) primarily describe communication in the context of interactions between corporate actors and consumers/the public, others such as whitewashing describe it as relevant also to interactions with regulators and peer organizations (e.g., Huismann, 2011). Here, we chose to cover all organizational stakeholders that washing can be aimed at. Thus, based on the above, we define washing as follows:

Washing is a communicative activity aimed at organizational stakeholders and involves dissemination of intentional misinformation in various degrees about a socially relevant topic, performed instead of taking substantial organizational action.

We offer a definition of “publicwashing” that integrates the definitions of “publicness” and “washing.” This broad definition may apply to various contexts and manifestations of publicwashing in education and in other fields:

Publicwashing is a communicative activity of intentional misinformation regarding the extent to which political authority and public ideals shape organizational structures and processes. The communicative activity is aimed at organizational stakeholders, to cover the absence of substantial organizational action to support or promote publicness.

This definition does not determine the actors who are involved in the communicative activity. These actors may include not only a range of agents within the organization (e.g., owners, managers, public relation personnel, field employees) but also external agents (e.g., privatization advocates, nonprofits, elected politicians, appointed officials).

Motives for Publicwashing

Scholars have suggested regarding organizations in modern society as social actors (Highhouse et al., 2009). As such, they are “capable of intentional, accountable, and self-regulated action” (Whetten et al., 2009, p. 544). To illuminate impression management by organizations, it is important to examine their motives (Highhouse et al., 2009). To better understand what the motives for publicwashing in organizations are, we turned to the literature on corporate social responsibility (Frynas & Stephens, 2015; Garriga & Méle, 2004). Based on these works, we claim that key motives of publicwashing are instrumental-economic and social integration–oriented by nature.

Instrumental-economic theories suggest that organizations adopt publicwashing tactics aiming to maximize the owners’ value, obtain competitive advantages with respect to resources despite insufficient organizational capabilities and noncompliance with social demands, or promote a socially positive marketing image (Garriga & Méle, 2004). For example, the resource-based theory, which is representative of this group, would argue that publicwashing is a targeted action to acquire a competitive advantage (Frynas & Stephens, 2015). Public schools typically receive more public funds than private schools do, and their public goals may attract donors. Thus, advocates of private schools have instrumental-economic motives to engage in publicwashing and enjoy the resources that a public image may provide.

Integrative theories claim that organizations use publicwashing tactics to superficially adhere to mandatory legislation, balance the conflicting interests of different stakeholders, or gain and maintain social legitimacy (Garriga & Méle, 2004). For example, institutional theory would argue that publicwashing is driven by the need of organizations to conform with institutional pressures of the field in which the organization operates and that it reflects ceremonial conformity to institutional myths that helps organizations gain legitimacy (Frynas & Stephens, 2015; Meyer & Rowan, 1977). In the somewhat parallel framework of legitimacy theory, publicwashing would be perceived as aimed at achieving societal legitimation by conforming with the dominant social values (Frynas & Stephens, 2015). Last, a descriptive take of stakeholder theory may regard publicwashing
as a reaction to the demands of one or more central stakeholders (Frynas & Stephens, 2015). These types of motives are particularly relevant to the field of education, where organizational goals range from students’ achievements and wellbeing to democratic and economic social interests, encompassing various types of practices that may be presented as effective tools to achieve these goals and satisfy various stakeholders (Perry-Hazan & Birnhack, 2016; Zancajo et al., 2021).

In addition to the two abovementioned motives of publicwashing that are rooted in the corporate social responsibility literature, we suggest a third motive inherent in social critique in education, that is, whiteness ideology. We draw here on an additional use of term “whitewashing” in the context of filmmaking (i.e., casting White actors in non-White roles, see Zhang, 2017), and on scholarly observation that organizations using publicwashing in education may do so to conceal processes, behaviors, and outcomes that perpetuate White privileges (see Riel et al., 2018). Critical scholars suggest that with a growth in the population of nonhegemonic social groups, the wealthy White middle class is less inclined to participate and fund pure public services (Berkovich, 2021; Berliner & Biddle, 1995). Thus, publicwashing can be a rationalist–materialist or value-driven ideological organizational behavior.

Tactics of Publicwashing

Publicwashing in Goffman’s terminology is a “front stage” performance of an organization. When reflecting on “signs given” by organizations in their publicwashing performance, the concept of framing is central because it conveys a transformative and purposeful message. In the social movement literature, framing marks active agentic meaning construction efforts that differ from existing frames and challenge them (Benford & Snow, 2000). Frames help interpret occurrences in action-oriented ways, as they are “intended to mobilize potential adherents and constituents, to garner bystander support, and to demobilize antagonists” (Snow & Benford, 1988, p. 198). Collective action frames are produced by a discursive processes of frame articulation that involves a complex editing process in which “[s]lices of observed, experienced, and/or recorded ‘reality’ are assembled, collated, and packaged” (Benford & Snow, 2000, p. 623) to create a coherent and persuasive message.

We suggest two framing approaches that underlie publicwashing tactics (i.e., “sign given”) used by organizations: claim deceptiveness and attention deflection. Claim deceptiveness can take various forms, such as vagueness or ambiguousness, omission, and falsification or lying (de Freitas Netto et al., 2020; Lauffer, 2003). Attention deflection manifests when organizations adopt some form of alternative to socially desired practices to circumvent full compliance. Attention deflection can take different forms, such as implementing socially desired organizational practices to divert attention from their problematic practices in other social domains, or sharing considerable positive information to be viewed as transparent and compliant while covering poor organizational performance related to the socially desired subject (Marquis & Toffel, 2012). Note that whereas in the claim deceptiveness approach the scope of the mismatch between front and back stage is substantial, in the attention deflection approach the mismatch is relatively smaller.

Publicwashing in the Charter School Reform

A prominent example of publicwashing in education is the charter school reform in the United States. The case of charter schools exemplifies how publicwashing is manifested in a large group of organizations, which may have a crucial effect on education policy. Charter schools have spread at a rapid rate in the past several decades and are now present in 44 states (Haber, 2021; Lay & Bauman, 2019). In the vast majority of states that authorize charter schools, the statutes establishing these schools explicitly define them as “public” schools [or “public charter schools”]. As noted, publicness is the functional or behavioral extent to which political authority and public ideals shape organizational structures, processes, and outcomes. The public characteristics of charter schools are their funding by taxpayers and the free education they offer (Black, 2013; Green et al., 2013; Lubienski, 2001). Yet, charter schools differ from public schools in other functional characteristics. First, there are considerable distinctions between the governance of public and charter schools. One difference has to do with the charter itself. New public schools are opened by decision of local education agencies, which are usually school districts, whereas some states grant chartering authority to nonprofit private entities (Green et al., 2013; Superfine & Woo, 2018). Another difference relates to the governing board. Elected school boards have been thought to play an essential role in preserving local control of U.S. public schools (Lay & Bauman, 2019; Lubienski, 2001), whereas many states permit private boards of directors to operate charter schools (Green et al., 2013). Charter schools are not open to public scrutiny in the same way as district-run schools are (Lay & Bauman, 2019; Lubienski, 2001). This illustrates that when it comes to charter schools, publicness is not viewed as a unidimensional phenomenon but as a multidimensional one, making this case ideal for publicwashing manifestations. Moreover, charter schools may be perceived as a better option than school vouchers, which allow parents to use their taxes to pay private school tuition, because they reflect a lower level of privatization than voucher plans do. This broad range of values facilitates publicwashing by charter schools because it makes possible strategies of decoupling (Marquis & Toffel, 2012; Siano et al., 2017).

Having established that the publicness debate in relation to charter school reform is multifaceted, we analyze both “back stage” and “front stage” performances by these schools. As far as the “back stage” is concerned, charter schools are typically free from various kinds of regulations that apply to public schools, including labor regulations (e.g., teachers’ unions, teacher pay, certification requirements), financial oversight, and curricular requirements (see Haber, 2021; Riel et al., 2018; Superfine & Woo, 2018). Regulatory schemes vary considerably depending on the state’s charter policy. Scholars have also questioned the commitment of charter schools to inclusion and diversity. Such commitment is a behavioral characteristic of public schools, relating to their public goals. For example, Barnard-Brak et al. (2018) found that there are significantly fewer students with disabilities enrolled in charter schools than in public schools at the national and state levels, and Haber (2021) found that charter schools select the best performers in the race- and class-specific niche they seek to attract. There are also substantial concerns
relating to racial and class segregation in charter schools (e.g., Riel et al., 2018).

We now turn to the “front stage” performance of charter schools. The labeling of charter schools as “public schools” is emphasized by organizations that advocate the charter school reform, such as the National Alliance for Public Charter Schools and KIPP Foundation (see Kretchmar et al., 2014). These organizations stress the publicness of charter schools even in states whose legislation does not clearly define charter schools as public schools. Over two decades, advocates of charter schools used framing tactics, mainly claim deceptiveness and attention deflection. Lubinski (2001) argued that charter advocates hoped to “reconfigure” the definition of “public” by blurring the line between private and public schools, applying the logic of market theory to public schooling, restricting the term “public” to immediate consumers rather than to taxpayers or citizens in general, and divorcing it from the explicit and historical orientation toward the public good (pp. 643, 660). Lubinski noted that this rhetoric enabled charter advocates to portray the charter school reform as apolitical and gain bipartisan support. Similarly, Black (2013) argued that attaching the label “public” to charter schools, although they lack the substantive characteristics of public schools, was aimed at changing the perception of charter schools by the public (p. 477). Kretchmar et al. (2014) raised broader arguments, noting that by characterizing charter schools as public, advocates of the charter school reform hide their efforts to promote “back door” forms of privatization, and challenge the notion of education as a public good (p. 746).

Advocates of charter schools also used attention deflection tactics, which manifested in the rebranding of public schools as “traditional public schools.” This term may imply that public schools are one type of public school characterized by outdated teaching and learning practices, unlike the innovative practices of charter schools. Moreover, in certain states, school choice advocates have been consistently using the term “government” or “government-run” schools to describe public schools so as to undermine the political support of public schools and further blur the use of the term “public” (see Bosman, 2016).

The symbolic emphasizing of charter schools’ publicness occurs in one arena, while stressing part of their actual private characteristics occurs in another. Green et al. (2013), who explored charter school litigation, analyzed how charter school supporters, private charter school boards, and educational management organizations have opportunistically emphasized the public nature of charter schools to be eligible for funding under state constitutional law, but at the same time emphasized their private characteristics to evade federal and state statutory requirements that apply to public entities and protect employees and students. Superfine and Woo (2018) found that although in most circumstances charter school advocates are “masquerading” as public entities, in the legal arena these advocates have made arguments about their public or private nature as fits particular interests at the moment. These findings demonstrate that charter school advocates often use the policymaking arena as the “front stage” area of their performance, while the legal arena serves as the “back stage” area in which we see “signs given off” of their decoupling. Their opportunistic arguments produced conflicting decisions by courts and administrative agencies with regard to the publicness of charter schools (see a review in Green et al., 2013; Superfine & Woo, 2018). As many Americans are hostile to public social services (see Mettler, 2011), in certain circumstances where the audience is composed of school choice supporters, charter advocates relinquished the rhetoric emphasizing the publicness of charter schools in the political arenas as well (see Brown, 2015).

The motives behind claim deceptiveness and attention deflection efforts by charter schools are both instrumental-economic and social integration–related. We see charter schools engaging in publicwashing because publicness is a resource that provides financial or regulatory advantages (see Frynas & Stephens, 2015). In several states, charter schools can become profit-making entities that develop charters as a way of accumulating capital (Black, 2013; Riel et al., 2018). States that do not allow for-profit management of charter schools may allow contracting with for-profit organizations that provide educational services (Black, 2013; Green et al., 2013). In addition, attaching the label “public” to charter schools has assisted charter advocates to gain social legitimacy (see Garriga & Melé, 2004). This label deflects the attention from the private characteristics of charter schools to their public characteristics (see Marquis & Toffel, 2012). It has also enabled charter school advocates to communicate a broad spectrum of values, ranging from community empowerment and equal opportunity to freedom of choice and market-based competition; thus, it has assisted in recruiting political support and appealing to audiences on the right and on the left (Lubienski, 2001).

Characterizing the public label of charter schools as public-washing is consistent with the studies cited above, which raised concerns about the instrumental and political motives of charter school advocates who promoted this label (Black, 2013; Green et al., 2013; Kretchmar et al., 2014; Lubienski, 2001; Superfine & Woo, 2018). Yet, none of these studies used the term “washing” or referred to the literature on organizational washing. Lubienski is the only scholar who analyzed the rhetoric of charter school advocates, focusing on the case of Michigan. He explored the advocates’ framing of charter schools as public schools but did not theorize this phenomenon and did not identify concrete tactics that may be generalizable to different contexts. Black (2013) explored competing theoretical conceptions of the public good in education and concluded that charter schools were inconsistent with the public good in the public school system, which is the group good. His study did not focus on the discourse about charter schools but on substantive aspects relating to the definition of charter schools as public schools. Green et al. (2013) and Superfine and Woo (2018) focused on the legal dimensions of the debate about the publicness of charter schools rather than on rhetorical strategies. Kretchmar et al. (2014) employed a network analysis of privatization to illustrate the relationships between different actors who shape policy decisions. Unlike the rest of the studies cited above, her study did not focus on the publicness of charter schools.

There are manifestations of publicwashing of private schools in other countries as well. For example, Gerrard et al. (2017), who analyzed an Australian policy supporting public funding of
both government and nongovernment schools and its subsequent media coverage, identified important shifts “in what is ‘public’ about schooling” (p. 504). The policy highlighted the greater need of the public sector (in the concentration of disadvantaged students), but also reflected an articulation of the public that constructs all schools (government and nongovernment) as similarly “publicly” valuable (p. 516). Likewise, a reform in Israel aimed at “strengthening public education” enabled Waldorf and democratic (open) schools to change their status from recognized unofficial (private) schools to official (public) schools. The schools were obliged to limit parental fees and regulate their admission policies, but were not required to relinquish their private governance—the organizations that own and manage them (see Skop, 2013, 2017). Future studies may use the conceptual framework of publicwashing to explore these phenomena.

Conclusion

In this article, we conceptualized the phenomenon of publicwashing in education. We believe that the framework we offered may serve as a basis for a more focused research effort on the motives, manifestations, and outcomes of publicwashing in education. The article exemplified the scholarly value of publicwashing by discussing the concept in the U.S. charter school reform. The lens of symbolic communication that we adopted contributes to legal and policy studies that identified a discrepancy between the “public” label of charter schools and their private characteristics.

Although this essay focuses mainly on the performance of publicwashing, a few words on its reception and impact are needed. Political research shows that individuals are more likely to place actors that use simpler campaign messages in their purposeful ideological position (Bischof & Senninger, 2018). This suggests that effective front stage performance of publicwashing can result in improving an organization’s image as public. The debate on the public identity of organizations is entangled in the broader political debate on publicness in a given society. We propose that social structures and processes can “influence, pressure, encourage, or condition” dramaturgical performances (Edgley, 2013, p. 3) such as publicwashing. When an issue, for example, publicness, becomes a matter of political controversy, people with extreme views further polarize their opinions (Wojcieszak, 2011). Under these circumstances, we can expect extremists to have stronger binary views of publicness, as well as heightened public attention and conflict around organizational publicwashing. Nevertheless, the sociopolitical context does not deterministically shape the course of the dramaturgical interaction (Edgley, 2013). One also cannot ignore the fact that publicwashing itself aims to create confusion about what it means to be a public organization and about the ethical and moral implications of publicness. We assume that publicwashing involving core domains of publicness, such as ownership and political control, is likely to raise further animated debates.

The phenomenon of publicwashing in education may be prevalent in various other cases beyond the context of privatizing schooling. For example, the term “publicwashing” may describe practices of corporate actors who donate money to public schools or initiate volunteer projects in public schools to obfuscate activities relating to market-based educational reforms or other forms of privatization. Future studies could explore how publicwashing is manifested in such contexts, and what particular tactics it adopts. Future studies should also pay attention to public–private partnerships, as one known manifestation of decoupling is the phenomenon of organizations declaring collaboration with a partner in initiatives related to a socially desired subject, without actual actions that support the partnership (Siano et al., 2017). In addition, future studies should analyze the differences between practices of publicwashing and those that similarly blur the line between public and private but do not involve deception. We invite other scholars to explore publicwashing in multiple organizational and political arenas, and develop the study of symbolic communication relating to privatization in education and other areas, such as social and health services.

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NOTES
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1Pinkwashing has been also used to describe a state’s deliberate organized strategy to emphasize progressive views and actions on the topic of LGBT (lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender) rights for the purpose of legitimizing other problematic behavioral aspects.

2In the context of this essay, we address publicness as an objective status. We acknowledge that elements of this status are grounded in contemporary public ideals, and as such have a perceptual component. Nevertheless, we contend that these perceptions represent a consensus of a particular period.

3See National Alliance for Public Charter Schools (https://data.publiccharter.org)

4See Education Commission of the States (http://ecs.force.com/mbdata/MBQuestNB2C?rep=CS2001)

5See Center for Education Reform (https://edreform.com/issues/choice-charter-schools/laws-legislation/)

6See California Charter Schools Association (https://www.ccsa.org/who-we-are)

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