Greenhushing – Conceptual Foundations and Literature Review

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Abstract

This conceptual paper reviews the literature and explains theoretical mechanisms for *Greenhushing* – the under communication of environmental sustainability practices by firms. Drawing on greenhushing research and environmental sustainability communication literature, the paper synthesises nine reasons that explain why sustainable firms under communicate or strategically remain silent about their sustainability practices. These reasons are classified into four categories: Risk-oriented mechanisms, competitiveness-oriented mechanisms, cognitive mechanisms and resource constraints. The paper illustrates how three theoretical mechanisms, at the individual level (cognitive dissonance), the organisational level (signaling theory) and the institutional level (legitimacy theory), help explain greenhushing in sustainable firms. This research contributes to the sustainability communication and green marketing literatures by conceptualising an emerging phenomenon that remains under-theorised in the literature and has important implications for policymakers seeking to promote genuine sustainability communication.

Keywords

Greenhushing; Environmental Sustainability Communication

Track

Social Responsibility & Ethics

1. Introduction and Research Aim

Operating sustainably has become a strategic imperative for firms around the world. More firms are adopting sustainability practices in their business operations to increase competitiveness and meet growing stakeholder demands. The number of firms adopting green technologies has nearly doubled in recent years (World Bank, 2025) and 83% of companies are increasing their sustainability-related investments compared to previous years (Deloitte Global, 2025). The benefits for Firms that voluntarily adopt and report their sustainability practices experience clear positive benefits over time (Friske, Hoelscher, & Nikolov, 2023).

Despite the prevalence of sustainability practices among firms and the prospective firm benefits of communicating them transparently, an increasing number of organisations is no longer communicating what they are doing. A paradoxical phenomenon is now emerging in corporate green communication, where organisations with legitimate environmental achievements are choosing to hide rather than publicise their green credentials. A recent research report revealed that nearly a quarter of 1,200 surveyed firms remained silent about their carbon emissions reduction efforts (Kähkönen, Bourgeault, & Hagbrink, 2022). Although no universally accepted term or definition exists, this phenomenon is commonly referred to as Greenhushing by scholars and practitioners (Ettinger, Grabner-Kräuter, Okazaki, & Terlutter, 2021; Letzing, 2022).

Greenhushing broadly refers to the idea of under communicating the environmental characteristics of a firm or a product. Even though the notion of under communicating certain achievements is not new, only recent scholarship has referred to the phenomenon as a distinct concept with strategic implications. While extensive research exists on greenwashing, the opposite phenomenon, Greenhushing, remains largely unexplored (Gatti, 2024) despite growing practical evidence of its prevalence (The Economist, 2025). Academic literature looking at Greenhushing beyond single cases or industries remains scarce and theoretical explanations of the phenomenon are virtually not existent. Yet, understanding why Greenhushing occurs is important because it potentially undermines decades of progress in corporate environmental sustainability. If leading sustainable firms hide their environmental achievements, it becomes difficult for stakeholders to reward genuine environmental leadership, creating market failures in the green economy which still largely relies on market mechanisms to drive environmental sustainability outcomes. Moreover, widespread Greenhushing could slow the diffusion of sustainable practices because firms lose opportunities to learn from sustainability leaders and isomorphic pressures to adopt such practices disappear (Castro-Lopez, Iglesias, & Santos-Vijande, 2023). To address these issues, this research is a first attempt at systematically understanding the Greenhushing phenomenon. The following two research questions are addressed in this study:

RQ1: What are the underlying theoretical reasons for greenhushing?

RQ2: How can greenhushing be classified into distinct categories?

2. Methodology

Following established approaches for conceptual papers (Jaakkola, 2020; Vargo & Koskela-Huotari, 2020), our research design employs theory synthesis to systematically explore and classify the greenhushing phenomenon. Theory synthesis aims to conceptually integrate multiple theoretical perspectives across different literature streams (Jaakkola, 2020). This approach contributes to extant knowledge by summarizing and integrating extant knowledge of a concept or phenomenon and links previously unconnected or incompatible pieces in a novel way (MacInnis, 2011). Theory synthesis is appropriate to chart a new or unstructured phenomenon that is spread across diverse domains and disciplines and which extant research addressed in piecemeal fashion (Jaakkola, 2020).

The conceptual development in this research proceeded through stages of systematic literature review (SLR), followed by theory synthesis and conceptual classification. To identify scientific articles on greenhushing, we first conducted a systematic review of articles in academic research databases. We used keyword searches in the SCOPUS, Web of Science (WoS) and Springer Link databases. The following search terms were applied: "greenhushing OR green hushing OR greenhush OR under communication" AND "sustainab* OR CSR OR ESG" to article title, abstract and keywords. The selection was further narrowed down to English articles and publications in scholarly journals or books. After duplicate results were eliminated 47 papers remained. The abstracts of all retrieved articles were subsequently scanned for relevance. Further, the reference lists of retrieved articles were scanned to ensure no important papers on the topic, which could not be retrieved with the above search terms, were missed. For example, earlier empirical research (Kim & Lyon, 2015; Testa, Miroshnychenko, Barontini, & Frey, 2018) used the term *Brownwashing* to refer to the same phenomenon. The final sample comprised of 31 peer reviewed articles.

Secondly, the review of academic literature was complemented with grey literature on the phenomenon. As an emerging phenomenon that remains under-researched in the peer-reviewed literature, the authors anticipated limitations on the theoretical insights emerging from academic-only articles. Following established practice for working with the grey literature in systematic reviews in management and organizational studies (Adams, Smart, & Huff, 2017), the same search terms were applied on the Dow Jones Factiva Database. The selection was limited to *Headline and Lead Paragraph*, and excluded *Republished news*; *Recurring pricing and market data*; *Orbituaries, sports and calendars*, as well as non-English sources. This yielded an additional 286 articles, of which 76 were excluded for non-relevance. Complementing academic materials with grey literature was hoped to provide a more comprehensive account of the greenhushing phenomenon and capture additional reasons as well as their theoretical underpinning that may not have been considered in the peer reviewed literature of primarily single case studies of the phenomenon.

3. Greenhushing Reasons

The analysis of the academic and grey literatures revealed nine distinct reasons that explain why some firms under communicate or remain silent about their sustainability practices and goals. The following section briefly describes each reason and links them to the articles retrieved in the systematic review.

3.1 Greenhushing to allay claims of violating fiduciary duties

A growing number of corporations no longer publicises their ESG investments or climate targets to protect the organisation from claims of violating their fiduciary duties to shareholders (Clark, 2022; Speed, 2022). Greenhushing in these firms emerged as a growing number of conservative lawmakers is questioning the legitimacy of ESG considerations influencing a firm's strategic business decisions. Some jurisdictions have passed laws attacking ESG investments and attorney generals in multiple conservative-leaning U.S. states started banning banks that factor climate risks into their investment decisions (Letzing, 2022). Further, when firms experience financial stress or require capital, managers prefer to divert attention from discretionary environmental initiatives that may be perceived as diminishing shareholder value (Kim & Lyon, 2015).

3.2 Greenhushing to avoid scrutiny and prevent reputational harm

Some firms under communicate to mitigate against the negative impacts of unmet stakeholder expectations arising from increased scrutiny. Proactive communication of environmental sustainability commitments raises expectations from stakeholders generally concerned about firm behaviour (Schoeneborn, 2017). Publicising sustainability commitments can lead to increased scrutiny and raise future expectations of voluntary improvements that firms might struggle to achieve or that could become too costly to carry out. To not to incite unwanted attention, reduce scrutiny and risk being held to a higher standard, some firms have adopted a strategy of muted greening (Crane, 2000; Polonsky & Rosenberger, 2001; Stoll, 2022). Further, firms may under communicate to avoid accusations of hypocrisy or greenwashing by external audiences. Research shows consumers are critical when CSR communication comes directly from firms and consumer cynicism about sustainability claims can dis-incentivise proactive communication (Chan, 2013; Morsing, Schultz, & Nielsen, 2008). Thus, to avoid reputational threats, organizations may practice 'hypocrisy avoidance' by remaining strategically silent when facing inconsistent sustainability attributions, particularly when environmental claims contradict behaviour in other organizational areas (Birth, Illia, Lurati, & Zamparini, 2008; Carlos & Lewis, 2018).

3.3 Greenhushing to prevent regulatory risks

Firms may avoid actively promoting their environmental practices to minimize regulatory risks due to unclear methodologies and terminology around sustainability practices. Inappropriate use of sustainability language can result in significant regulatory penalties, as seen in countries such as Germany (Sedilekova, 2022), the UK (Hicks, 2022) or Australia (ACCC, 2025), where the regulator has taken firms to court and imposed heavy fines for misleading consumers about organisational sustainability practices. Thus, in jurisdictions with strict liability for misleading conduct, firms may under communicate sustainability to minimise regulatory risks and prevent executive liability (Barrett, 2023; Durkin, 2023).

3.4 Greenhushing for lack of competitive value

Firms may remain silent about sustainability credentials when they perceive insufficient firm benefits to justify communication costs. Consumer confusion and inadequate reference frames about green terminologies (Feucht & Zander, 2018; Winterich, Reczek, & Makov, 2023), and indifference to sustainability attributes can result in greenhushing behaviour. When consumers won't consider sustainability in purchasing decisions, 'green' becomes a fruitless marketing strategy (Peattie & Crane, 2005). Empirical evidence shows tourism companies communicate far less than they practice due to little competitive value (Font, Elgammal, & Lamond, 2016) and EMAS certified firms don't promote their certification due to lack of consumer awareness and demand (Heras-Saizarbitoria, Boiral, Allur, & García, 2020).

3.5 Greenhushing for lack of organisational resources

Smaller firms may under communicate sustainability practices due to resource constraints for external communication. SMEs differ from larger organizations in ownership structure and lack sophisticated PR apparatus, creating cost disadvantages for sustainability communication (Wickert, Scherer, & Spence, 2016) Unlike larger companies with formal reporting mechanisms, SMEs rely on informal, face-to-face communication and have low motivation to invest in costly formal reporting (Spence, 2016).

3.6 Greenhushing due to altruistic–instrumental value misalignment

Firms may under communicate when values associated with sustainability conflict with those of sustainability promotion. Environmental sustainability often satisfies intrinsic motivations where achievements are valued for themselves, creating cognitive dissonance with the instrumental nature of promotion (Jenkins, 2006, 2009). Managers in some firms prefer being sustainable rather than promoting it, viewing promotion as a public relations activity of larger enterprises (Kechiche & Soparnot, 2012; Murillo & Lozano, 2006). Greenhushing in these firms reduces individual-level dissonance from altruistic-instrumental value misalignment.

3.7 Greenhushing to prevent lower quality attributions

Firms may avoid communicating green credentials to prevent consumer perceptions that environmental gains come at the cost of other qualities. Consumers intuitively believe green products perform worse than conventional equivalents, often attributing lower functional performance to such products (Delmas & Gergaud, 2021; Gleim, Smith, Andrews, & Cronin Jr, 2013). Firms may thus engage in greenhushing to prevent losing consumers believing environmental performance compromises technical performance or perceive products as 'too green' (Newman, Gorlin, & Dhar, 2014; Wood, Robinson, & Poor, 2018).

3.8 Greenhushing to prevent psychological discomfort of customers

Some firms under communicate to avoid causing psychological discomfort to their customers. Green credentials are routinely de-emphasized in hospitality and tourism because they may offend customers seeking indulgent experiences (Font et al., 2016). When on vacation, consumers don't want to hear about sustainability initiatives addressing global problems like climate change, as this contradicts their sense of entitlement and desire to escape everyday responsibilities (Miller, Rathouse, Scarles, Holmes, & Tribe, 2010). Some firms deliberately hide sustainability efforts, implementing environmental practices 'behind the scenes' or 'out of sight' to avoid causing psychological discomfort to their guests (Font et al., 2016).

3.9 Greenhushing as a Countersignaling strategy

Firms may under communicate based on countersignaling theory. High-quality firms may benefit from not signaling their qualities because audiences form favorable opinions without direct signals (Feltovich, Harbaugh, & To, 2002). When audiences possess prior information about firm quality, disclosure benefits may be outweighed by costs, with additional signaling perceived as 'bragging' (Harbaugh & To, 2005; Luca & Smith, 2015). Research suggests that consumers view silent firms as positively as those actively promoting sustainability, indicating that greenhushing might be more effective than direct marketing of accomplishments (Cheng, Dong, & Feng, 2024; Ginder, Kwon, & Byun, 2021).

4. Conceptual Foundations and Classification

The analysis of literature revealed that greenhushing is a multi-faceted phenomenon driven by complex interactions between individual sustainability motivations, organisational sustainability positioning, and institutional environments. At the institutional level, firms face legitimacy threats from rapidly emerging norms and regulatory uncertainty; at the organisational level, they perceive insufficient competitive value due to lack of consumer awareness and demand or lack resources for costly communication activities; and at the individual level, decision-makers experience value conflicts between altruistic sustainability motivations and the instrumental nature of marketing communication. Based on these reasons, greenhushing can be classified into the following four categories.

1. Risk-oriented mechanisms: Including fears of greenwashing accusations, regulatory penalties, and stakeholder backlash.
2. Competitiveness-oriented mechanisms**:** Including perceived lack of competitive advantage, consumer indifference, quality attributions and countersignaling.
3. Cognitive mechanisms: Including conflicts between altruistic sustainability motivations and instrumental promotion, and cognitive dissonance by consumers.
4. Resource constraints: Including limited communication capacity in SMEs.

Conceptually, greenhushing builds on three theoretical foundations at the institutional, the organisational and the individual level of analysis. First, signaling theory suggests that firms with superior environmental performance will actively communicate to reduce information asymmetry and differentiate themselves (Connelly, Certo, Ireland, & Reutzel, 2011; Connelly, Ketchen, & Slater, 2011). However, greenhushing represents an exception to this logic, suggesting that traditional signaling theory requires adaptation in some sustainability contexts.

Second, legitimacy theory asserts that organisations require social acceptance to survive and will manage communications to maintain legitimacy (Suchman, 1995). According to legitimacy theory, firms proactively communicate or disclose to build legitimacy or to address legitimacy threats. Greenhushing extends the logic of legitimacy to explain strategic under communication when proactive sustainability communication itself can threaten legitimacy in changing institutional environments. Third, cognitive dissonance theory explains how individuals act to reduce psychological discomfort (Festinger, 1957). Applied to the greenhushing phenomenon, the theory helps explain why in some contexts, under communication is preferential because the opposite, proactive communication, may create cognitive dissonance for individuals internal and external to the organisation.

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