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## THE GREEN-HUSHING PARADOX: A SYSTEMATIC REVIEW OF STRATEGIC SILENCE AND ITS IMPACT ON BRAND AUTHENTICITY AND CONSUMER TRUST

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### ABSTRACT

**Objective:** This study aims to examine the phenomenon of green-hushing, defined as the strategic reduction of sustainability communication despite the continued implementation of environmental practices, and to analyze its driving factors and implications for brand authenticity and consumer trust amid an increasingly closely scrutinized ESG environment.

**Research Design & Methods:** This study employs a Systematic Literature Review (SLR) method following the PRISMA 2020 protocol and the SPAR-4-SLR framework. A total of 194 articles from Q1-ranked journals and global industry reports published between 2015 and 2026 were analyzed. The data were synthesized using a thematic approach to identify patterns related to strategic communication, consumer perceptions, and institutional pressures.

**Findings:** The findings indicate that "green-hushing" practices emerge as a strategic response to regulatory pressures, litigation risks, and growing skepticism toward sustainability claims. However, reduced communication is consistently associated with lower perceptions of transparency, which undermines brand authenticity and ultimately erodes consumer trust. The study's results also reveal a paradoxical effect, whereby efforts to mitigate reputational risk through silence may actually trigger negative conclusions from consumers and reduce market confidence.

**Contribution:** This study contributes to the body of knowledge by extending signaling theory into the context of absent or reduced communication, and by conceptualizing "green-hushing" as a form of strategic signal withdrawal. It also integrates insights from sustainability communication and consumer behavior to explain how reduced transparency influences trust formation.

**Novelty:** This study introduces the concept of the "Sustainability Gap," which describes the mismatch between actual environmental performance and public perception due to a lack of communication. It also proposes a conceptual framework linking "green-hushing" practices, transparency, brand authenticity, and consumer trust.

**Keywords:** Green-hushing, Strategic Silence, Brand Authenticity, ESG Communication, Consumer Trust.

JEL codes: M31, M14, G38, Q56.

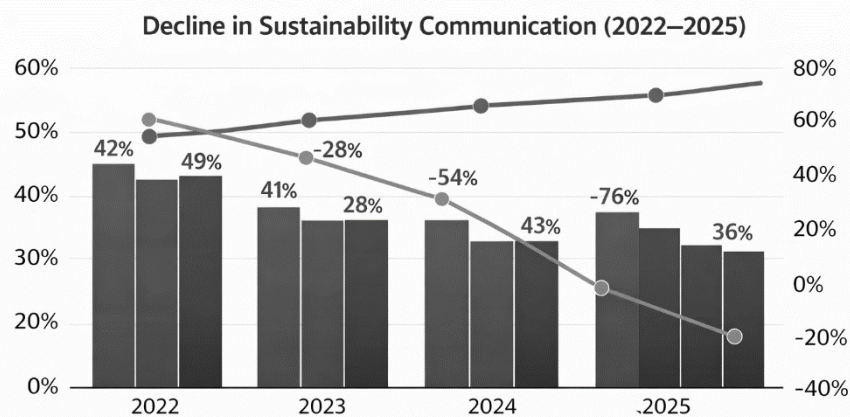
**Article type:** research paper

## INTRODUCTION

The current paradigm shift in corporate sustainability communication reveals increasingly complex and contradictory dynamics, particularly regarding how companies navigate growing pressures related to legitimacy, stakeholder expectations, and reputational risks. Over the past two decades, sustainability communication practices have been dominated by the phenomenon of greenwashing a symbolic strategy in which companies manipulate information to build an eco-friendly image without backing it up with substantive actions (Delmas & Burbano, 2011; Marquis et al., 2016). Within the theoretical framework of legitimacy, such manipulative practices are understood as efforts to maintain social conformity with external norms through cosmetic communication (Lashitew, 2021; Martins & Gomes, 2019). However, recent developments indicate that companies no longer face risks solely from "talking too much" in a superficial manner, but also from a new risk stemming from "talking too little." This phenomenon is known as "green-hushing," referring to a company's strategic decision to withhold, conceal, or minimize communication regarding their actual sustainability initiatives, even though these environmentally friendly activities continue substantively within the organization (Güler & Özgen, 2026; Tong et al., 2025). This shift from excessive exposure to strategic silence reflects a fundamental change in the logic of marketing communication, in which radical transparency is no longer always viewed as a safe strategy, but rather as a potential source of reputational risk and legal claims (Tullio et al., 2025).

The green-hushing phenomenon becomes increasingly relevant when combined with growing institutional credibility and conflicting external pressures. On the one hand, companies are being pushed to increase transparency through increasingly stringent regulations, such as global ESG standards and expanded disclosure requirements (Manita et al., 2018; Tullio et al., 2025). On the other hand, the increasing politicization of sustainability issues, particularly in markets such as the United States, creates the risk of a backlash against companies that explicitly communicate their environmental commitments (Bergquist & Jones, 2025; Hilson, 2024). This situation gives rise to what can be termed the “paradox of disclosure,” in which companies face a dilemma between the need to communicate sustainability commitments to build legitimacy and the negative risks arising from such exposure (Cardillo & Basso, 2025). Recent studies indicate that most global companies continue or even increase their investments in net-zero initiatives, yet simultaneously reduce the intensity of their public communications (Hilson, 2024; Strauß & Šimunović, 2025). This indicates a disconnect between substantive actions and symbolic communication, which conceptually challenges the classical assumption in marketing literature that communication is a direct reflection of corporate strategy (Huang et al., 2025).

**Figure 1 The Declining Trend in Global Sustainability Communication**



Source: by author (2026)

The visualization in Figure 1 does not merely present a downward trend in macroeconomic statistics; rather, it reveals a theoretical anomaly that challenges the foundations of traditional signaling theory. Based on the classical assumptions of signaling theory, a firm with high operational quality (in this case, an increase in the net-zero budget from 68% to 78%) would always be motivated to send a strong positive signal to the market to reduce information asymmetry and gain a competitive advantage (Strauß & Šimunović, 2025). However, the divergent pattern in Figure 1 exposes the failure of this axiom to explain corporate silence strategies. When operational commitment increases but public communication exposure structurally declines, silence no longer functions as an “absence of signal,” but rather transforms into a deliberate withdrawal of signals (strategic signal withdrawal). This phenomenon triggers detrimental market psychological mechanisms: rather than interpreting silence as humility, consumers process this information vacuum through negative inferences (Acuti et al., 2022). Figure 1 thus visually confirms that, in a market environment marked by suspicion, a strategy of withholding information due to the risk of green-hushing actually produces a paradoxical effect that undermines the long-term relationship between brands and consumers (Fu et al., 2022; Hilton, 2025). Thus, the graph not only represents descriptive trends but also reveals the psychological and market mechanisms underlying the implications of greenwashing on corporate–consumer relationships.

The implications of the pattern shown in Figure 1 extend beyond the consumer level and lead to systemic consequences within the industry ecosystem. The consistent decline in public communication, as reflected in the graph, leads to a reduced visibility of sustainability practices in the public sphere, which in turn can hinder benchmarking and the diffusion of innovations among firms (Bini et al., 2018; Ringham & Miles, 2018). From an institutional theory perspective, this phenomenon has the potential to weaken the normative and mimetic pressures that typically drive organizations to adopt sustainable practices through imitation and social legitimacy (Marquis et al., 2016). As market-leading firms reduce their communication, industry standards become less visible and less collectively defined. Furthermore, this decline in transparency also weakens public accountability, which has traditionally been a key driver of organizational change toward more sustainable practices (Nickell & Roberts, 2014). In other words, the graph illustrates that green-hushing is not simply an individual communication phenomenon, but rather a mechanism that, in aggregate, can slow the transition to a green economy. This creates a paradox where increased investment in sustainability is not accompanied by increased institutional pressure, thus diminishing its potential collective impact (Ahmed et al., 2026).

Although the patterns in Figure 1 demonstrate empirical significance, the marketing literature remains relatively limited in systematically examining the implications of this withholding of information for consumer behavior and brand performance. Most previous research has focused more on the consequences of dishonest cosmetic communication, while the psychological impact of the absence of communication in the form of “green-hushing” has not received proportional attention (Acuti et al., 2022; Huang et al., 2025). As reflected in the graph, this strategy of shifting to a state of extreme silence has proven to be equally damaging to public trust. The simultaneous decline in communication exposure and consumer trust shown in the graph indicates a causal relationship that requires deeper explanation through an integrated theoretical framework. Therefore, there is an urgent need to develop a conceptual model capable of identifying the optimal level of sustainability communication that is, a level sufficient to build trust without triggering the risk of skepticism or political backlash. This study addresses this gap through a systematic literature review (SLR) of 194 selected articles, integrating signaling theory, brand transparency concepts, and consumer trust literature to explain how green-hushing shapes market perceptions and influences the long-term relationship between brands and consumers in the context of modern marketing.

## LITERATURE REVIEW

### Signaling Theory and Strategic Silence

Signaling theory has traditionally been used to explain how companies reduce information asymmetry by sending credible signals about their internal quality to external stakeholders (Connelly et al., 2011; Fu et al., 2022). In the sustainability context, these signals are typically manifested through ESG reports, third-party certifications, and green marketing communications aimed at increasing trust and competitive differentiation (Manita et al., 2018; Marquis et al., 2016). The mainstream literature assumes that increased disclosure will improve market efficiency and strengthen the relationship between companies and consumers, as additional information allows stakeholders to make more accurate evaluations of a company's sustainability commitments (Acuti et al., 2022; Huang et al., 2025). However, this assumption is increasingly questioned in the context of the rise of greenwashing, where the proliferation of unreliable signals actually diminishes the informational value of sustainability communication as a whole (Delmas & Burbano, 2011; Marquis et al., 2016).

In such a “signal-contaminated” market environment, greenwashing can be understood as a rational strategic response, rather than a communication failure. Based on the signaling game framework, firms will choose not to send a signal when the costs of signaling including the risk of litigation, reputational exposure, and public scrutiny outweigh the potential benefits of market differentiation (Hilton, 2025; Tong et al., 2025). Greenwashing is not the absence of strategy, but rather a form of adaptation to an increasingly high-stakes and ambiguous institutional environment (Tullio et al., 2025; Okeke, 2026). Interestingly, several studies indicate that companies with relatively strong sustainability performance are actually more likely to engage in green-hushing because they face the risk of over-scrutiny, where positive communication can trigger higher expectations and open the door to criticism of other aspects of the company's operations (Güler & Özgen, 2026; Koupaei et al., 2025). These findings directly challenge the basic assumption in signaling theory that high quality is always accompanied by greater communication intensity.

The green-hushing phenomenon indicates the possibility of a pooling equilibrium, where both high- and low-quality companies choose not to send signals because the market can no longer effectively differentiate the credibility of information (Hilton, 2025). This situation creates an information failure, where the absence of communication becomes the new norm and hinders sustainability-based differentiation mechanisms (Tong et al., 2025). The theoretical implications are significant, as they demonstrate that more communication does not always lead to better outcomes, particularly in contexts where trust in signals has eroded. However, the existing literature is still limited in explaining how this strategic silence is interpreted by consumers, and how the absence of signals influences the formation of brand trust and perception. Therefore, the development of a conceptual framework is needed to focus not only on the intensity of signals but also on the consequences of non-signaling in the context of modern sustainability communication.

### Dimensions of Brand Authenticity

Brand authenticity is one of the key determinants in shaping consumer evaluations of sustainability claims, particularly in the context of growing skepticism toward corporate communications (Acuti et al., 2022; Napoli et al., 2014). In marketing literature, authenticity is not understood as a single attribute but rather as a multidimensional construct reflecting consumers' perceptions of a brand's consistency, honesty, and sincerity (Lee et al., 2023; Zhao et al., 2023). The dominant conceptual framework identifies four main dimensions—continuity, credibility, integrity, and symbolism—which collectively shape how consumers assess whether a brand “truly” lives up to its claimed values (France et al., 2024; Shahzad et al., 2025). In the context of sustainability, the dimensions of credibility and integrity are particularly crucial because both are directly linked to the perception of whether a company's environmental actions are driven by substantive commitment or merely symbolic strategy (Huang et al., 2025).

However, the emergence of “green-hushing” introduces a new paradox in the literature on brand authenticity. On one hand, companies avoid the risk of greenwashing by reducing sustainability communication; on the other hand, this silence actually eliminates the evidence consumers need to evaluate a brand’s credibility and integrity (Falchi et al., 2022; Hilson, 2024). In other words, efforts to avoid over-communication can inadvertently result in under-signaling, which weakens perceptions of authenticity. This condition challenges the implicit assumption in the literature that authenticity is solely determined by the alignment between values and actions, without considering the role of communication as the primary mediator in the consumer evaluation process (Acuti et al., 2022). Without communication visibility, even substantial sustainability efforts may fail to translate into a perception of authenticity in consumers’ minds. Greenwashing also impacts the symbolic dimension, which relates to a brand’s ability to serve as a vehicle for expressing consumer identity. The literature indicates that consumers are increasingly using brands as tools to represent their personal values, including a commitment to the environment (Arli et al., 2018). When companies fail to communicate their sustainability stance, they miss opportunities to participate in this identity construction, thereby diminishing the brand’s social relevance. These implications suggest that authenticity is not merely the result of “what the company does,” but also “what consumers know and perceive.” However, existing literature remains limited in explaining how the absence of communication (green-hushing) specifically affects each dimension of authenticity, as well as how these shifts in perception translate into consumer trust and behavior. Therefore, a more integrated approach is needed to understand the role of communication in shaping brand authenticity in the era of green-hushing.

### **Communicative Decoupling and Institutional Theory**

Institutional theory emphasizes that organizations operate not only to achieve economic efficiency, but also to gain legitimacy through conformity with prevailing social norms and expectations (DiMaggio et al., 1983; Marquis et al., 2016). In the context of sustainability, communication plays a central role as a symbolic mechanism for demonstrating this alignment to stakeholders (Bini et al., 2018). Classical literature identifies the phenomenon of decoupling, where there is a gap between substantive actions and symbolic representations, with greenwashing as a prime example of “talking the talk but not walking the walk” (Lashitew, 2021; Marquis et al., 2016). However, recent developments point to the emergence of an alternative, less-explored form: green-hushing, which can be understood as “acting without speaking” or communicative decoupling (Tong et al., 2025).

This phenomenon reflects a shift in organizational legitimation strategies under increasingly complex and contradictory institutional pressures. On one hand, global regulations drive greater transparency through stricter ESG reporting requirements (Tong et al., 2025). On the other hand, the increasing politicization of sustainability issues creates new legitimacy risks, where explicit communication may actually trigger backlash from certain groups (Bergquist & Jones, 2025). In this context, green-hushing serves as an adaptive strategy for managing legitimacy risks by minimizing public exposure while maintaining sustainable practices internally (Güler & Özgen, 2026). However, this strategy is not without consequences, as by reducing communication, companies also reduce their contribution to the formation of industry norms and expectations. Green-hushing has the potential to weaken mechanisms of institutional isomorphism, particularly mimetic and normative isomorphism, which typically drive the diffusion of best practices among organizations (DiMaggio & Powell, 1983). When leading companies no longer actively communicate their sustainability practices, other companies lose a reference point for emulation, thereby slowing the adoption of sustainability innovations at the industry level (Ringham & Miles, 2018). Furthermore, reduced transparency also weakens public accountability, which is a key driver of organizational change toward more sustainable practices (Nickell & Roberts, 2014). Thus, green-hushing impacts not only the firm level but also broader institutional dynamics. However, the literature has yet to explicitly examine how this form of communicative decoupling influences stakeholder perceptions, particularly those of consumers, as well as its implications for brand legitimacy in the long term.

### **The Role of Brand Transparency**

Brand transparency is a key element in building consumer trust, particularly in markets characterized by information asymmetry and growing skepticism toward corporate claims (Acuti et al., 2022; Schnackenberg & Tomlinson, 2016). Transparency is not only related to the quantity of information disclosed, but also to the quality, clarity, and intent behind such disclosures. The literature identifies three main dimensions of transparency—observability, comprehensibility, and intentionality—which collectively determine the extent to which consumers can understand and trust the information provided by companies. In the context of sustainability, transparency becomes increasingly important because environmental claims are often difficult for consumers to verify directly, making them highly reliant on the information provided by companies (Huang et al., 2025). Greenwashing is inherently at odds with the principle of transparency, as it reduces or even eliminates the visibility of information relevant to consumers. When observability decreases, consumers lose the ability to objectively evaluate sustainability processes and impacts, thereby increasing their reliance on assumptions or heuristics (Acuti et al., 2022). Furthermore, the absence of communication can also be interpreted as a lack of intentionality, suggesting that the company may be deliberately withholding information, even if that is not the case (Falchi et al., 2022). This creates the risk that strategic silence will be interpreted negatively by consumers, particularly in environments where awareness of greenwashing practices is already high (Huang et al., 2025). Thus, transparency serves not

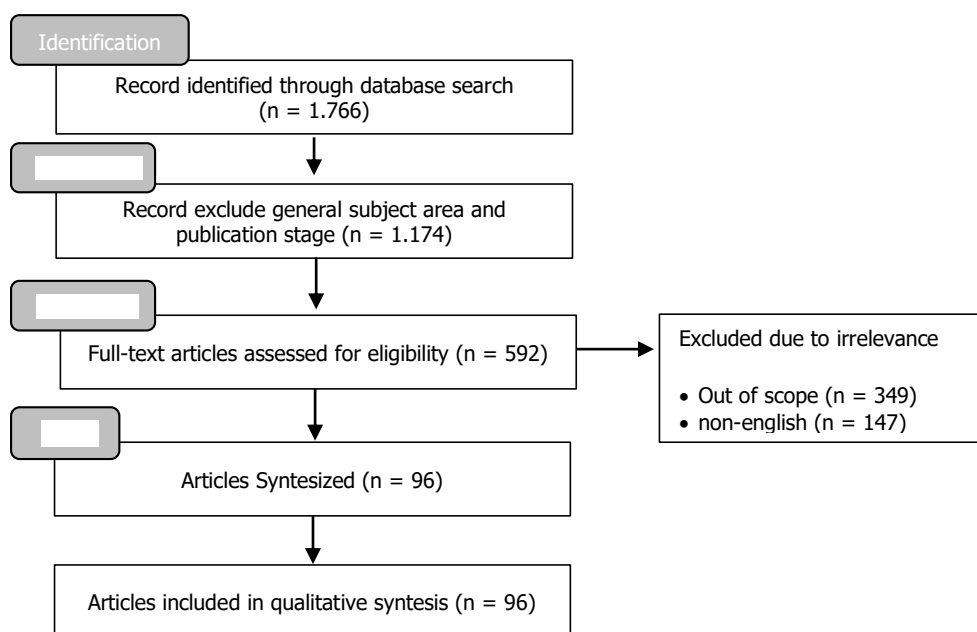
only as a communication tool but also as a trust-building mechanism that is highly sensitive to changes in disclosure patterns.

The literature indicates that transparency plays a moderating role in the relationship between sustainability communication and consumer trust. High levels of transparency can amplify the positive impact of communication, while low transparency can trigger skepticism even when communication is intensive (Acuti et al., 2022). However, in the context of greenwashing, the main challenge is not merely a lack of transparency, but the absence of communication that creates an information vacuum. Under these conditions, consumers tend to fill the information gap with negative inferences, which ultimately erode trust and brand perception. This suggests that it is not only "what is communicated" that matters, but also "what is not communicated." Nevertheless, the literature remains limited in explaining how this information vacuum is processed by consumers, as well as how the interaction between transparency and strategic silence shapes trust and market behavior. Therefore, further research is needed to integrate the perspective of transparency with the phenomenon of green-hushing within a more comprehensive framework.

## METHODS

To ensure methodological rigor, transparency, and replicability, this study adopted the PRISMA 2020 framework as a structured protocol for conducting a systematic literature review (SLR). This approach was chosen because the literature on greenwashing remains fragmented and is rapidly evolving across disciplines, including marketing, sustainability, and corporate communications. By applying standardized screening procedures, this study aims to minimize selection bias and enhance the reliability of the resulting synthesis of findings. The literature search was conducted through two major academic databases, Scopus and Web of Science, which were selected for their coverage of high-impact international journals relevant to the fields of marketing and sustainability. The search was conducted using a combination of keywords such as "greenwashing," "sustainability communication," "greenwashing," "brand transparency," and "consumer trust," with a restriction to English-language publications to maintain the consistency and quality of the analyzed literature.

**Figure 2 Literature screening process using the PRISMA framework**



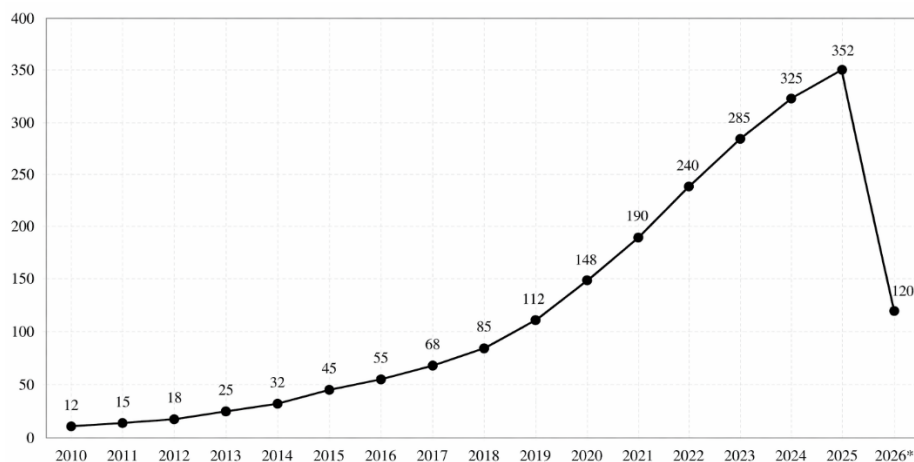
The review process consisted of four main stages: identification, screening, eligibility, and inclusion. During the identification stage, a total of 2,890 initial articles were retrieved from the database. The screening stage involved removing duplicates and excluding studies that were not relevant to the context of business, marketing, and sustainability communication. Next, the eligibility stage focused on a more in-depth evaluation of the articles' content to ensure alignment with the research focus, particularly regarding brand transparency, authenticity, consumer trust, and ESG communication dynamics. In the final stage, the inclusion process considered methodological quality and theoretical contributions, prioritizing high-impact journal articles (Q1) and credible industry reports. As shown in Figure 2, this systematic selection process yielded 194 final articles that met all inclusion criteria. The significant reduction from the initial number reflects the rigor of the screening process, particularly regarding topic relevance, methodological quality, and publication standards. This phased approach allowed the study to focus the analysis on studies that directly contribute to understanding the phenomenon of greenwashing in a marketing context.

Next, data analysis was conducted using a thematic analysis approach to identify conceptual patterns in the selected literature. This process included an initial reading, coding of key concepts, grouping into thematic categories, and the formulation of themes that represent the structure of the literature. This approach allows for the identification of relationships between concepts while revealing dominant areas and gaps in previous research. To enhance validity and reliability, this study emphasizes the use of high-quality sources, transparent documentation of the selection process, and consistency in the application of inclusion and exclusion criteria. Thus, the methodological procedures applied provide a strong foundation for the analysis of the results presented in the following section.

## RESULT

This section presents the main findings of the systematic literature review conducted, focusing on the development patterns of research related to greenwashing, sustainability communication, and their implications for consumer behavior. An initial descriptive analysis was conducted to identify the dynamics of growth in scientific publications as an indicator of academic attention to this phenomenon. This approach is commonly used in SLR studies to map the evolution of a research field and identify phases of conceptual and empirical development (Huang et al., 2025). Specifically, annual publication trends were analyzed based on the final filtered results from the Scopus and Web of Science databases. The visualization in Figure 1 illustrates a significant increase in the number of publications in recent years, particularly after the issues of greenwashing and ESG transparency came under global scrutiny in business practices and regulations (Delmas & Burbano, 2011; Tong et al., 2025). This surge also correlates with increasing institutional pressure on companies to manage sustainability communications more carefully, including the emergence of the phenomenon of “green-hushing” as a strategic response (Ahmed et al., 2026; Tong et al., 2025).

**Figure 3 Publication growth trends**



Source: diolah dari WOS dan Scopus (2026)

As shown in Figure 3, the publication trend indicates a relatively slow growth pattern in the early period (2010–2019), followed by a significant acceleration since 2020. This increase suggests that the issue of sustainability communication has evolved from a peripheral topic to a central focus in the literature on marketing and strategic management. The sharp surge during the 2022–2026 period reflects the increasing complexity of the challenges faced by companies, particularly in balancing the need for transparency with the reputational risks associated with sustainability claims (Acuti et al., 2022; Falchi et al., 2022).

These findings also confirm that green-hushing is beginning to gain attention as a distinct yet closely related phenomenon to greenwashing. While greenwashing focuses on misleading over-communication, green-hushing represents strategic under-communication, both of which have significant implications for consumer trust and corporate legitimacy (Marquis et al., 2016; Okeke, 2026). Thus, the rising trend in publications not only reflects quantitative growth but also indicates a paradigm shift in understanding sustainability communication as a multidimensional strategic issue. Overall, these results reinforce the argument that greenwashing is a rapidly developing area of research with high relevance both theoretically and practically. Therefore, further analysis is needed to explore how this phenomenon affects key variables in marketing, such as brand authenticity, transparency, and consumer trust.

### Thematic Literature Analysis

After mapping publication growth trends, the analysis proceeded to a deeper stage using a thematic approach to identify the conceptual structure underpinning the literature on green-hushing. This approach aims not

only to group existing studies but also to uncover patterns of relationships among concepts that shape the academic discourse in this field. Based on a systematic coding process of the 194 selected articles, it was found that the literature is consistently organized into three main thematic clusters: (1) strategic determinants of greenwashing, (2) implications for consumer perceptions and behavior, and (3) institutional and market consequences. These three themes represent an interconnected spectrum of analysis, ranging from the micro level (corporate decisions), through the meso level (consumer responses), to the macro level (market and institutional dynamics).

To deepen understanding of this structure, this study further classifies the literature into more specific sub-themes and maps the contributions of each study within each category. This classification process allows for the identification of dominant areas as well as remaining research gaps. The results of the thematic classification are presented in Table 1.

**Table 1 Thematic classification of green-hushing literature**

Main Theme	Sub-theme	Representative Literature
<b>Strategic Determinants of Green-Hushing</b>	Regulatory pressure and compliance risk	Tong et al. (2025)
	Litigation and reputational risk	Marquis et al. (2016); Okeke (2026)
	ESG skepticism and stakeholder scrutiny	Delmas & Burbano (2011); Zhong et al. (2026)
	Information asymmetry and signaling challenges	Ahmed et al. (2026); Lashitew (2021)
	Strategic silence as risk mitigation	Güler & Özgen (2026); Koupaee et al. (2025)
<b>Consumer Perception and Behavioral Implications</b>	Reduced transparency and information visibility	Acuti et al. (2022); Sun & Xu (2025)
	Consumer trust erosion	Arlı et al. (2018)
	Brand authenticity and credibility	Lee et al. (2023); Zhao et al. (2023)
	Negative inference and skepticism	Huang et al. (2025); Okeke (2026)
	Impact on purchase intention	Acuti et al. (2022); Arlı et al. (2018)
<b>Institutional and Market Consequences</b>	Limited diffusion of sustainability practices	Bini et al. (2018); Ringham & Miles (2018)
	Weakening institutional pressures (normative & mimetic)	Bergquist & Jones (2025); Marquis et al. (2016)
	Reduced corporate accountability	Nickell & Roberts (2014); Sawani et al. (2010)
	ESG disclosure-performance paradox	Cardillo & Basso (2025); Manita et al. (2018)
	Market inefficiency and signaling distortion	Delmas & Burbano (2011); Tong et al. (2025)

Source: by author (2026)

As shown in Table 1, the distribution of the literature indicates that academic attention is most concentrated on the dimensions of strategic determinants and implications for consumer perceptions. This suggests that most research still focuses on how and why companies adopt greenwashing practices, as well as how these practices influence consumer responses. The dominance of sub-themes such as regulatory pressure, reputational risk, and skepticism toward ESG confirms that companies' decisions to limit sustainability communication result from strategic calculations in the face of external uncertainty and potential negative consequences (Kalogiannidis et al., 2025). On the consumer side, the literature consistently identifies transparency as a key mechanism bridging the relationship between corporate communication strategies and market responses (Kim & Lee, 2018). Reduced information visibility fosters negative inference, where consumers tend to interpret ambiguity as a signal of a lack of commitment to sustainability (Acuti et al., 2022; Mollenkopf et al., 2022). In this context, brand trust and authenticity are influenced not only by what is communicated, but also by what is not communicated.

Meanwhile, the dimensions of institutional and market consequences remain relatively underdeveloped and tend to be conceptually scattered. Although some studies have identified impacts such as weakened normative pressure, limited diffusion of sustainability practices, and market signal distortions, theoretical integration across studies remains limited. This situation indicates a gap between micro-level analysis and broader macro-level implications. Nevertheless, the imbalance in research focus across dimensions indicates that the existing literature remains fragmented and has not fully captured the cross-level relationships between corporate strategies, consumer perceptions, and institutional implications. This situation opens the door for more integrative follow-up analysis, particularly in elaborating the mechanisms of relationships between variables that have not been extensively explored in previous studies.

## Emerging Conceptual Relationships

Based on the results of the thematic analysis and literature classification conducted, the next step is to identify patterns of conceptual relationships that emerge among the main themes in studies on greenwashing. The findings indicate that the three thematic clusters strategic determinants, implications for consumer perceptions, and institutional and market consequences do not emerge as entirely separate categories, but are often discussed sequentially and interrelatedly in the analyzed literature. At the organizational level, several studies indicate that factors such as regulatory pressure, litigation risk, and increasing skepticism toward ESG claims are often associated with changes in corporate communication strategies, particularly in the form of restrictions or reductions in sustainability communication (Marquis et al., 2016; Tong et al., 2025). Additionally, conditions of information asymmetry and uncertainty in the interpretation of sustainability signals are also reported as contexts influencing how companies manage their communication exposure (Ahmed et al., 2026; Delmas & Burbano, 2011).

The literature indicates that changes in the level of communication transparency are often associated with variations in consumer perceptions. Several studies report that limited information regarding sustainability practices can increase ambiguity in consumers' evaluations of a company's commitment (Acuti et al., 2022; Sun & Xu, 2025). In this context, concepts such as consumer trust, brand authenticity, and perceived transparency consistently emerge as variables used to explain consumer responses to limited communication practices (Arlı et al., 2018; Huang et al., 2025). Additionally, several studies link communication limitations to a tendency toward negative inferences, particularly in the context of growing awareness of greenwashing practices (Okeke, 2026).

On a broader level, a number of studies link these dynamics of consumer perception to implications in market and institutional contexts. The literature reports that limitations in sustainability communication may be associated with reduced visibility of best practices, which could potentially influence the diffusion of sustainability innovations across organizations (Bini et al., 2018; Ringham & Miles, 2018). Additionally, some studies also note a connection between limited communication practices and the dynamics of institutional pressure, including normative and mimetic aspects, although discussions on this dimension are relatively limited and have not yet been conceptually integrated (Bergquist & Jones, 2025; Marquis et al., 2016). In the context of accountability, the literature also indicates that the level of information transparency is associated with stakeholders' ability to evaluate a company's sustainability performance (Nickell & Roberts, 2014).

Overall, these results indicate the presence of recurring patterns of interrelationships in the literature, where strategic determinants, consumer perceptions, and market consequences are often discussed within a sequential analytical framework. However, the degree to which these relationships are explicitly addressed varies across studies, with most research focusing on one or two dimensions in isolation. These findings suggest that while the relationships among these themes have been acknowledged in the literature, their development within an integrated conceptual framework remains relatively limited.

## Summary of Key Studies

To reinforce the results of the thematic analysis identified earlier, Table 2 presents a number of representative studies that examine the determinants and implications of green-hushing through various methodological approaches, ranging from theoretical modeling to empirical analysis and global-scale industry reports. This presentation aims to demonstrate the consistency of findings across research contexts while confirming the patterns of relationships emerging in the literature.

**Table 2 Summary of Key Studies on Green-Hushing**

Author (Year)	Source	Method	Key Findings
Hilton (2025)	Environment & Development Economics	Signaling game	Green-hushing occurs when signaling costs exceed benefits
South Pole (2024)	Global report	Data analysis	Companies reduce communication under high scrutiny
Shahzad et al. (2025)	British Food Journal	PLS-SEM	Message consistency enhances authenticity
Khan et al. (2026)	Journal of Advertising Research	Mixed-method	Green-hushing reduces transparency and erodes consumer trust.
Luo & Bhattacharya (2006)	Journal of Marketing	Secondary data analysis	CSR influences market value through customer satisfaction; a mismatch between CSR performance and a company's capabilities can reduce satisfaction.
Delmas & Burbano (2011)	California Management Review	Conceptual	Information asymmetry drives greenwashing and green-hushing
Marquis et al. (2016)	Organization Science	Archival study	Institutional pressure influences sustainability communication strategies

Author (Year)	Source	Method	Key Findings
<a href="#">Acuti et al. (2022)</a>	Journal of Business Research	Experiment	Transparency enhances consumer trust
<a href="#">Arli et al. (2018)</a>	Journal of Business Ethics	Survey	Skepticism toward green claims reduces purchase intent
<a href="#">Sun &amp; Xu (2025)</a>	Journal of Cleaner Production	Empirical	Limited ESG information increases consumer ambiguity
<a href="#">Huang et al. (2025)</a>	Journal of Marketing Analytics	Quantitative	Negative inferences arise due to a lack of communication
<a href="#">Tong et al. (2025)</a>	Business Strategy and the Environment	Panel data	ESG regulations influence the intensity of corporate communication
<a href="#">Ahmed et al. (2026)</a>	Technological Forecasting & Social Change	Empirical	Reputational risk drives defensive communication strategies
<a href="#">Bini et al. (2018)</a>	Ecological Economics	Conceptual	Lack of transparency hinders the diffusion of sustainability practices
<a href="#">Ringham &amp; Miles (2018)</a>	Journal of Business Ethics	Case study	Limited communication reduces inter-firm learning
<a href="#">Torelli et al. (2020)</a>	Business Strategy and the Environment	Experiment	Different levels of greenwashing influence stakeholders' perceptions of environmental responsibility and reactions to environmental scandals

Source: edited by the author (2026)

Based on Table 2, the literature shows consistent findings that greenwashing is closely linked to external risk considerations, particularly in the context of signaling costs, regulatory pressure, and potential reputational consequences. Studies based on signaling games indicate that companies tend to reduce sustainability communication when the costs associated with information disclosure exceed the expected benefits ([Hilton, 2025](#)). A similar pattern is also reflected in empirical studies and industry reports showing that increased external scrutiny is associated with a decrease in the intensity of companies' sustainability communication ([South Pole, 2024](#); [Tong et al., 2025](#)). In addition to external factors, the literature also identifies the role of information uncertainty and market skepticism in shaping communication strategies. Conceptual studies suggest that information asymmetry and the difficulty in distinguishing credible signals from greenwashing practices drive companies to adopt a more limited communication approach ([Delmas & Burbano, 2011](#); [Marquis et al., 2016](#)). These findings are reinforced by qualitative studies showing that concerns about greenwashing allegations are one of the factors influencing companies' decisions regarding the management of sustainability communication exposure ([Falchi et al., 2022](#); [Torelli et al., 2020](#)).

At the consumer level, the synthesis findings indicate that variations in sustainability communication are associated with changes in brand perceptions. Several empirical studies report that information limitations increase ambiguity in consumer evaluations and trigger a tendency toward negative interpretations of corporate commitments ([Huang et al., 2025](#); [Sun & Xu, 2025](#)). In this context, information transparency is consistently linked to levels of trust and perceptions of brand authenticity, where consistency and openness in communication play a role in reinforcing positive consumer evaluations ([Acuti et al., 2022](#); [Shahzad et al., 2025](#)). Changes in consumer perceptions are linked to broader outcomes, including purchase intent and brand equity. Survey and experimental studies indicate that increasing skepticism toward sustainability claims can reduce consumer purchase intent ([Arli et al., 2018](#)), while financial modeling-based analyses indicate that discrepancies between actual performance and public perception may potentially affect a company's brand value ([Luo & Bhattacharya, 2006](#); [Zhang & He, 2014](#)). Furthermore, findings at the macro level suggest that communication limitations are also associated with reduced visibility of sustainability practices, which may potentially influence the innovation diffusion process at the industry level ([Bini et al., 2018](#); [Ringham & Miles, 2018](#)).

Overall, the findings in Table 2 indicate that greenwashing emerges in the literature as a phenomenon associated with the interplay between external risk factors, corporate communication strategies, and variations in consumer perceptions and market implications. The variety of methodological approaches used in these studies—ranging from theoretical models, quantitative analysis, to qualitative studies—indicates that this pattern of findings consistently emerges across various research contexts.

### Consumer Response Patterns

A literature synthesis indicates that variations in the level of sustainability communication are consistently associated with changes in consumers' cognitive and affective responses. Several studies report that a decrease in the visibility of sustainability communication is associated with a decline in consumer trust in the company. Findings from longitudinal studies and cross-market surveys indicate that information transparency serves as a key determinant in shaping trust, so that limited communication tends to reduce consumer confidence in the company's sustainability commitments ([Acuti et al., 2022](#); [Falchi et al., 2022](#)). Information constraints increase ambiguity in

the consumer evaluation process (Wu & Wu, 2016). In situations where information regarding sustainability practices is not sufficiently available, consumers face difficulties in assessing the credibility and consistency of a company's actions. Empirical studies indicate that low transparency increases perceptual uncertainty, which in turn influences evaluations of sustainability performance (Sun & Xu, 2025). This is reinforced by findings that information asymmetry in ESG communication contributes to increased complexity in the consumer assessment process (Delmas & Burbano, 2011).

Perceptions of brand authenticity consistently emerge as a key variable in explaining variations in consumer responses to sustainability communications. Empirical model-based studies indicate that brand authenticity serves as an advanced evaluation reflecting alignment between communicated values and corporate actions. In this context, information transparency serves as the foundation for building authenticity, where the consistency and clarity of messages enhance perceptions of brand credibility and integrity (France et al., 2024; Shahzad et al., 2025). In addition to these evaluative mechanisms, the literature also identifies the emergence of negative inferences under conditions of limited information. Several studies indicate that when companies reduce their sustainability communications, consumers tend to fill the information gap with less favorable assumptions. This phenomenon is particularly evident in the context of growing awareness of greenwashing practices, where the absence of information can be interpreted as an indication of a lack of commitment or an attempt to conceal information (Huang et al., 2025; Okeke, 2026).

Several studies also link these cognitive responses to behavioral implications, such as purchase intent and consumer engagement. Research indicates that a decline in brand trust and authenticity is associated with reduced purchase intent, particularly in product categories sensitive to sustainability issues (Arlı et al., 2018). This suggests that variations in sustainability communication not only influence perceptions but also have the potential to influence consumer behavior. Overall, these findings suggest that consumer responses to green-hushing are characterized by a relatively consistent pattern: a decrease in transparency followed by increased evaluative ambiguity, shifts in perceptions of authenticity, and a tendency toward negative interpretations. This pattern emerges across various methodological approaches and research contexts, indicating a systematic relationship between the level of sustainability communication and consumer responses in the literature.

### **Sectoral and Geographical Variations**

Literature reviews indicate that greenwashing practices are not evenly distributed but vary significantly across industrial sectors and geographic contexts. These variations are primarily linked to the level of regulatory exposure, sensitivity to environmental issues, and the intensity of stakeholder oversight. Several studies indicate that sectors with high levels of regulation and significant environmental risks such as energy, finance, and heavy manufacturing tend to exhibit a stronger tendency to restrict sustainability communications compared to other sectors (Delmas & Burbano, 2011; Marquis et al., 2016). In a sectoral context, the literature indicates that companies in industries with high public visibility and significant environmental impacts face greater pressure to ensure the accuracy of sustainability claims. These conditions increase the potential for litigation risks and regulatory scrutiny, ultimately prompting companies to adopt more cautious communication strategies or even limit the disclosure of sustainability information (Hilton, 2025). Panel data studies also show that increased ESG regulation is associated with changes in the intensity of corporate communication, where companies tend to reduce promotional claims and shift to a more defensive approach (Tong et al., 2025).

In sectors with highly complex supply chains, such as the fashion and consumer goods industries, greenwashing is often linked to difficulties in ensuring the consistency and verification of sustainability data across the value chain. The literature indicates that uncertainty in the measurement and reporting of sustainability performance can reduce companies' incentives to widely communicate their initiatives (Acuti et al., 2022; Sun & Xu, 2025). Additionally, growing consumer skepticism toward sustainability claims in these sectors also contributes to companies' tendency to avoid communication that risks being misinterpreted (Arlı et al., 2018).

From a geographical perspective, the literature indicates that variations in greenwashing practices are also influenced by differences in institutional environments and levels of regulatory pressure across regions. Studies indicate that in regions with strict sustainability regulatory frameworks, such as the European Union, companies tend to continue sustainability communication, but in a more formal, standardized, and compliance-based format (Economou et al., 2023; Marquis et al., 2016). Increasingly stringent ESG reporting regulations are driving companies to enhance transparency, albeit through a more cautious communication approach with minimal promotional claims.

In contexts with lower regulatory pressure or more fragmented institutional environments, companies demonstrate greater flexibility in determining their sustainability communication strategies. Several studies indicate that under these conditions, companies tend to be more selective in disclosing information, particularly when facing uncertainty regarding public interpretation or reputational risks (Ahmed et al., 2026; Delmas & Burbano, 2011). Additionally, social and political dynamics also influence communication patterns, where the polarization of environmental issues in certain regions can heighten companies' sensitivity to potential negative reactions from stakeholders (Bergquist & Jones, 2025). The literature also indicates that geographical variations affect not only

the level of communication but also the form and framing of sustainability messages. In some contexts, companies tend to adopt a more technical and data-driven communication approach to reduce interpretive ambiguity, while in other contexts, companies choose to limit communication overall as a risk mitigation strategy (Economou et al., 2023; Tong et al., 2025). This suggests that the practice of green-hushing is not only related to the decision to communicate or not, but also encompasses how such communication is constructed within various institutional contexts.

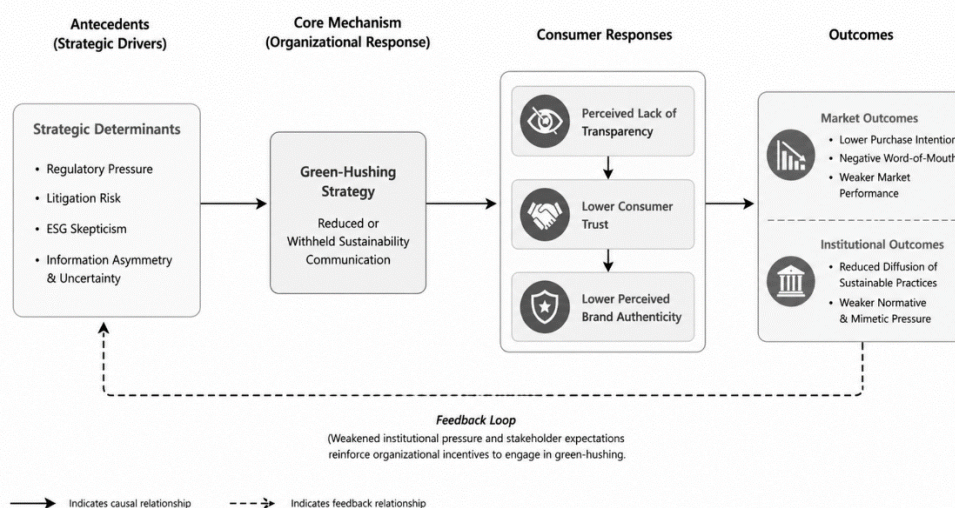
Overall, these findings indicate that the practice of green-hushing is influenced by a combination of sectoral and geographical factors that shape the context of corporate decision-making. Variations in regulatory levels, risk exposure, operational complexity, and institutional dynamics contribute to differences in sustainability communication strategies. This pattern indicates that green-hushing cannot be understood as a uniform phenomenon, but rather as a contextual practice influenced by the characteristics of the external environment in which companies operate.

**Conceptual Framework**

Based on thematic synthesis and the identification of conceptual relationship patterns, the analysis results indicate that the literature on greenwashing consistently forms a layered and sequential relationship structure. This pattern links strategic determinants at the organizational level to implications for consumer perceptions as well as consequences at the market and institutional levels. Several studies indicate that regulatory pressure, litigation risk, and growing skepticism toward ESG claims serve as key factors driving companies to limit sustainability communication (Delmas & Burbano, 2011; Lyon & Montgomery, 2015; Marquis et al., 2016). In this context, greenwashing emerges as a strategic response to external environmental uncertainty and rising reputational risks (Economou et al., 2023; Khan et al., 2026).

The literature indicates that such communication reduction practices are directly linked to a decline in the level of transparency perceived by consumers. Information constraints reduce the visibility of a company’s sustainability activities, thereby hindering consumers’ evaluation of the company’s commitments (Acuti et al., 2022; Schnackenberg & Tomlinson, 2016). In this context, transparency serves as the primary cognitive mechanism linking a company’s communication strategy to consumer responses. A decline in transparency is then associated with changes in perceptions of brand authenticity, which the literature defines as an evaluation of a company’s consistency and sincerity in upholding the values it communicates (France et al., 2024). Furthermore, brand authenticity is consistently identified as a key determinant in the formation of consumer trust. Previous studies indicate that when consumers perceive a brand as authentic, they tend to exhibit higher levels of trust, particularly in the context of sustainability claims that are prone to skepticism (Keilmann & Koch, 2026; Napoli et al., 2014). Conversely, communication limitations that reduce consumers’ ability to evaluate authenticity can lead to a decline in trust. Based on these relationship patterns, the findings of this study formulate a conceptual framework that integrates the relationships among the key variables identified in the literature.

**Figure 4 Conceptual Framework of Green-Hushing and Consumer Response**



Source: by author (2026)

As shown in Figure 4, the resulting conceptual framework illustrates causal relationships flowing from strategic determinants to implications at the consumer and market levels. In the initial stage, factors such as regulatory pressure, litigation risk, ESG skepticism, and information asymmetry were identified as the primary

drivers of the emergence of greenwashing strategies. This finding is consistent with the literature emphasizing that companies tend to adjust their level of communication in response to external risks and institutional uncertainty (Lyon & Montgomery, 2015; Marquis et al., 2016). Green-hushing is represented as an organizational mechanism manifested in the form of a reduction or restriction of sustainability communication (Torelli et al., 2020). Within this framework, the practice is directly linked to a decline in transparency perceived by consumers. The literature indicates that information constraints reduce consumers' ability to access and evaluate corporate activities, thereby increasing ambiguity in interpretation (Acuti et al., 2022; Schnackenberg & Tomlinson, 2016).

Reduced transparency is associated with changes in consumer evaluations, particularly regarding brand authenticity and trust. Previous studies indicate that transparency serves as a foundation for the formation of authenticity perceptions, which in turn influence the level of consumer trust in the brand (France et al., 2024; Napoli et al., 2014). In addition to these indirect pathways, several studies also indicate a direct relationship between communication gaps and a decline in trust, particularly when consumers interpret silence as a negative signal (Weaver & Hamby, 2019).

At the outcome level, this framework demonstrates that changes in trust and authenticity are associated with broader implications, both at the market and institutional levels. The literature links a decline in trust to weakened purchase intent, increased negative consumer communication, and reduced market performance (Luo & Bhattacharya, 2006). Furthermore, at the institutional level, limitations in sustainability communication are also associated with reduced diffusion of sustainable practices and weakened normative and mimetic pressures in driving organizational change (DiMaggio et al., 1983; Marquis et al., 2016). This framework also identifies the presence of a feedback loop, wherein the weakening of institutional pressure and stakeholder expectations has the potential to reinforce companies' tendency to maintain greenwashing practices. This pattern indicates that the relationships among variables are not merely linear but also form recurring systemic dynamics within the context of sustainability communication.

## DISCUSSION

The findings of this study reveal a fundamental paradox in modern sustainability communication: the higher the demands for transparency, the greater the incentive for companies to limit their communication. This paradox is not merely operational in nature, but reflects a structural tension between the logic of legitimacy and the logic of risk protection. In marketing literature, transparency has traditionally been positioned as a mechanism for building trust and strengthening relationships with consumers. However, in the increasingly politicized and tightly regulated context of ESG, transparency also carries exposure that can amplify vulnerability to public criticism, litigation, and accusations of greenwashing. Thus, green-hushing is not an anomaly but a rational consequence of an institutional environment that demands openness while penalizing imperfections (Economou et al., 2023).

From a theoretical perspective, this phenomenon challenges the fundamental assumption in signaling theory that more information always improves market efficiency. The findings of this study suggest that under conditions of high uncertainty, firms can actually derive strategic utility from reducing signaling. This indicates the existence of an optimal limit in communication, beyond which additional information no longer enhances clarity but instead increases the risk of misinterpretation. In other words, green-hushing can be understood as a form of "strategic under-signaling," where firms intentionally withhold information to avoid reputation costs that are disproportionate to the benefits of communication (Connelly et al., 2011; Testa et al., 2018). However, this strategy is ambivalent because the market is never truly passive; consumers continue to make interpretations, even when information is unavailable. This is where the key contribution of findings regarding consumer responses lies. Rather than viewing silence as the absence of a signal, consumers treat it as a signal in itself. Recent literature in consumer behavior indicates that in ambiguous situations, individuals tend to rely on implicit inferences that are often biased toward negative assumptions, particularly in moral domains such as sustainability (Huang et al., 2025; Sun & Xu, 2025). In other words, greenwashing does not eliminate the risk of negative perceptions, but shifts it from a risk based on claims to one based on suspicion. This explains why the decline in transparency observed in this study correlates with an erosion of trust and brand authenticity, even though companies may have substantial sustainability practices.

The relationship between transparency, authenticity, and trust indicates that consumers evaluate not only the content of the message but also the integrity of the narrative constructed by the company. Authenticity in this context functions as a "meta-judgment" that assesses whether the company acts consistently with its claimed values. When communication is restricted, consumers lose the reference points needed to construct that narrative, causing authenticity evaluations to weaken or even turn negative. This finding reinforces the argument that authenticity is not merely the result of intensive communication, but of sufficient communication to enable coherence of meaning (Napoli et al., 2014). Thus, greenwashing risks creating a disconnect between actual practices and public perception, which ultimately harms the company itself.

Deeper implications emerge when this phenomenon is viewed from a systemic perspective. Greenwashing not only affects the bilateral relationship between companies and consumers but also impacts the information ecosystem at the industry level. In a situation where many companies simultaneously reduce their sustainability

communications, the market experiences a collective decline in visibility regarding sustainable practices. This hinders social learning processes, benchmarking, and the diffusion of innovation—all of which are key to the transition toward a sustainable economy (Bergquist & Jones, 2025; Economou et al., 2023). In other words, green-hushing has negative externalities that slow collective progress, even though it may be considered rational from an individual perspective.

The sectoral and geographic variations found in this study further confirm that green-hushing is the result of contextual interactions, not a universal strategy. In sectors with high risk exposure, such as energy and finance, the decision to limit communication is easier to understand because the consequences of false claims are immense. However, what is striking is that even in sectors with high consumer pressure, such as fashion, this practice persists. This suggests that it is not only formal regulations that drive green-hushing, but also increasingly complex dynamics of reputation and social expectations. In a geographical context, differences in institutional environments reveal that green-hushing is also influenced by how risks are articulated and mediated by regulatory systems and culture (Bergquist & Jones, 2025; Testa et al., 2018). The finding regarding the existence of a feedback loop makes an important contribution to understanding the persistence of this phenomenon. When greenwashing reduces transparency, pressure from stakeholders also tends to weaken due to a lack of information needed to evaluate the company. This weakening of pressure then reduces the company's incentive to increase transparency, thereby creating a cycle that reinforces greenwashing practices. This dynamic indicates that the core issue lies not merely at the corporate level, but in systemic failures to establish incentive mechanisms that foster credible transparency. Without institutional interventions capable of balancing the risks and benefits of communication, green-hushing risks becoming the new norm in sustainability practices.

Conceptually, these findings also challenge the simple dichotomy between greenwashing and transparency. To date, the literature has tended to position companies on a spectrum between over-communication and full disclosure. However, green-hushing reveals a third dimension—strategic silence—which possesses its own logic and consequences. Thus, this study calls for an expansion of the theoretical framework in sustainability marketing to incorporate the dynamics of non-communication as an integral part of the communication strategy itself. This opens the door for further research to explore the conditions under which silence becomes a more rational strategy than speaking out. Ultimately, this discussion leads to the understanding that green-hushing is not merely a communication choice, but a reflection of structural imbalances within modern sustainability systems. Companies find themselves in a position where every communication action carries consequences that cannot be fully controlled, while expectations for transparency continue to rise. Under these conditions, green-hushing emerges as an adaptive strategy, but not a sustainable solution. Instead, this phenomenon highlights the need for an institutional framework capable of creating a safe space for honest transparency, without imposing disproportionate penalties for imperfections. Without systemic-level changes, companies will continue to face the same dilemma, and green-hushing will remain a rational yet problematic response in contemporary sustainable marketing practices.

## CONCLUSION

This study concludes that greenwashing is a communication strategy that has emerged in response to increasing regulatory pressure, reputational risks, and skepticism regarding sustainability claims. This practice reflects companies' efforts to manage the trade-off between transparency and the potential negative consequences of information disclosure. The synthesis results indicate that the decision to limit communication is not neutral but directly impacts the perceived transparency by consumers, which in turn affects perceptions of brand authenticity and trust. Furthermore, limited communication can also trigger negative interpretations, thereby accelerating the erosion of trust even in the absence of explicit claims. This study found that the implications of green-hushing extend to the market and institutional levels, including a potential decline in purchase intent and reduced visibility of sustainability practices, which can hinder the diffusion of innovation. Overall, green-hushing is a systemic and cross-level phenomenon that links corporate strategies with consumer responses and market dynamics. Therefore, understanding this phenomenon requires an integrated approach to capture the relationship between transparency, authenticity, and trust in the context of sustainability communication.

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