

Strategic communication and greenwashing: Theoretical reflections and managerial implications

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Abstract

Framing of the research: *The widespread occurrence of greenwashing presents significant challenges for companies in effectively communicating their sustainability efforts. As sustainability communication becomes an increasingly strategic asset for organisations, addressing the issue of greenwashing is crucial to maintaining credibility and trust with stakeholders. This study explores the intricate landscape of greenwashing and its implications for strategic communication in the realm of sustainability transition.*

Purpose of the paper: *Given the complexity and evolving nature of greenwashing phenomena, this paper aims to provide a comprehensive reflection on the role, research directions and managerial implications of a strategic communication approach designed to prevent greenwashing.*

Methodology: *This integrative literature review synthesises the existing research to develop a nuanced understanding of greenwashing and its mitigation through strategic communication.*

Findings: *The study reveals a notable gap in considering strategic communication perspectives within the context of greenwashing. Despite the continual emergence of new forms of greenwashing, research predominantly focuses on the supposed benefits and harms resulting from discrepancies between corporate talk and action. This paper argues that more attention should be devoted to comprehending and controlling the fundamental processes that result in such misalignments.*

Research limits: *This integrative literature review is limited by the inherent constraints of a deductive approach based on existing literature.*

Practical implications: *The research provides several practical recommendations for decision-makers to prevent accusations of greenwashing and mitigate the associated negative consequences. These recommendations include adopting a systemic approach to strategic communication, enhancing transparency, and fostering genuine stakeholder engagement.*

Originality of the paper: *This paper pioneers examining unresolved issues in sustainability communication contributing to entrenched greenwashing practices.*

Key words: *greenwashing; strategic communication; CSR communication; integrative literature review; greenwashing.*

1. Introduction

Sustainability and associated communication related to corporate social responsibility (CSR) have become a pivotal concern for businesses,

consumers, and policymakers in recent years (Crane and Glozer, 2016; Verk *et al.*, 2021). As organisations strive to meet the growing demand for environmentally responsible practices, the phenomenon of greenwashing has emerged as a significant challenge. Companies' increasing attempts to explicitly communicate and disseminate their social responsibility and environmental programs and practices to different audiences are due to several reasons: the need to comply with the latest and more stringent regulations in terms of environmental and social impact, the growing concern of public opinion regarding sustainability issues, the pressing requests from stakeholders and consumers, etc. (Scherer and Palazzo, 2011; Szabo and Webster, 2021). The potential associated benefits (e.g., social legitimation, favourable reputation, access to financial resources at lower costs) have further accelerated this process.

At the same time, many companies have tried to take shortcuts without having truly integrated sustainability into their corporate principles and values, or they have made strategic mistakes in their communication approach, creating a disconnect between *talk* and *actions* in order to appear more sustainable than they really are (Vollero, 2022). This phenomenon is generally known as greenwashing. While in its clumsier expressions, it is easily unmasked, greenwashing remains a defining trait of today's society. In more recent years, less sophisticated forms of greenwashing seem to be decreasing due to increasing social scrutiny by various stakeholders, facilitated by digital media, while the symbolic dimensions of identity washing, not always characterised by deliberate or intentional acts, are becoming increasingly pervasive (Bowen, 2014).

Recently, the European Commission, through national enforcement authorities (grouped in the Consumer Protection Cooperation Network (CPC), published an investigation into violations of EU consumer rights on corporate websites (European Commission, 2021), including greenwashing among the identified practices. The results showed doubtful, ambiguous or misleading claims regarding the reliability and completeness of information in 42% of cases. Also corroborating the evident 'emergency' of greenwashing is an analysis by The Economist (2021), which found the inclusion of controversial companies with greenwashing severe issues, such as fossil fuel producers (Exxon Mobil, Chinese coal mining companies), tobacco and gambling firms, among the top 20 ESG funds.

Communication studies provide various lenses through which to understand and address greenwashing. Two primary theoretical streams are the functionalist and constructionist/formative approaches (Schoeneborn *et al.*, 2020). The functionalist approach views communication as a tool for information transmission, emphasising clarity and efficiency. In contrast, the constructionist approach sees communication as a process of meaning-making, focusing on how different stakeholders interpret and understand messages. Both these approaches (functionalist vs constructivist) have had difficulties interpreting and countering degenerative phenomena such as greenwashing.

The strategic communication approach, which integrates elements of both these different theoretical streams, is particularly relevant to our study. It involves deliberate, goal-oriented communication efforts aimed

at shaping public perception and organisational identity (Holtzhausen and Zerfass, 2013). More generally, a significant proportion of the theories and models of sustainability communication have a predominantly strategic matrix, epistemologically originating from managerial and/or organisational effectiveness studies that support a positive relationship between sustainability activities and corporate (economic) performance (Porter and Kramer, 2006; Deetz, 2007; Golob *et al.*, 2013). However, this positive relationship is threatened by allegations of greenwashing that can also involve companies genuinely oriented towards sustainability due to the *self-promoter's paradox* (Gosselt *et al.*, 2019)¹. On the other hand, although literature with a predominantly constructivist approach has contested this mainstream framework, as it is positivist and functionalist (see, among others, Schultz and Wehmeier, 2010; Scherer and Palazzo, 2011), greenwashing behaviours have often been seen within the tension between individual companies and stakeholders, without exploring their underlying processes.

Within the realm of greenwashing, concepts related to a strategic communication approach, such as sense-making, sense-giving, and systemic perspectives, are also critical. Sense-making/sense-giving refers to the processes through which organisations interpret and communicate their actions to stakeholders; it is the process that shapes public perception of organisational identity in company-stakeholder interactions. A systemic perspective, instead, considers the broader context in which communication occurs, including the interplay of various organisational and environmental factors.

By acknowledging the current complexity of greenwashing phenomena, this paper aims to explore how a strategic communication approach can address the emergence of greenwashing. Both theoretical and managerial arguments underpin this exploration. Theoretically, understanding greenwashing through a strategic communication lens provides deeper insights into the underlying processes that drive such behaviours. Managerially, organisations can better mitigate the risks of greenwashing by adopting more reflective and transparent communication strategies. We employ an integrative literature review as our primary method to achieve this. An integrative approach allows us to synthesise diverse perspectives and findings from existing research, providing a comprehensive understanding of the issue. The paper offers several insights into integrating sustainability principles to activate a virtuous circle of sense-giving/sense-making in strategic communication, where the company can recognise the contribution of stakeholders in relevant decisions: a perspective that integrates different theoretical approaches seems to be the most promising for addressing challenges on these issues. The work aims to take a holistic view by integrating the literature and shifting the focus from individual

¹ The term 'self-promoter's paradox' refers to the fact that communicating CSR efforts is a necessity that cannot be avoided, but at the same time, excessive communication about these aspects can induce scepticism, both towards the message and the company, and call into question the motivations behind why the company communicates. Given the overall emphasis that companies place on this type of message, this phenomenon can have negative repercussions even for companies genuinely oriented towards sustainability.

2. Research design

This paper is based on an integrated literature review that critically analyses and synthesises the most representative studies on a topic in a unified way to generate new perspectives on the issue (Torraco, 2005). This methodology is the most appropriate choice for this work, as it is meant to develop a reflection on how a strategic communication approach can address the greenwashing emergency. Adopting an integrative review allows us to develop a comprehensive conceptualisation (Creswell, 2007) of strategic communication in the context of greenwashing research. Unlike quantitative approaches focusing on measuring the prevalence or impact of specific greenwashing issues, an integrative review enables us to critically reflect on the conceptual underpinnings and practical implications of strategic communication in this context. This approach avoids using quantitative metrics of systematic literature reviews (e.g., frequency analysis) because the vast literature in greenwashing research would have made the analysis inconclusive for the present research aim (Snyder, 2019), while it is suitable for developing nuanced insights and identifying specific gaps in the current literature that can inform future research and practice.

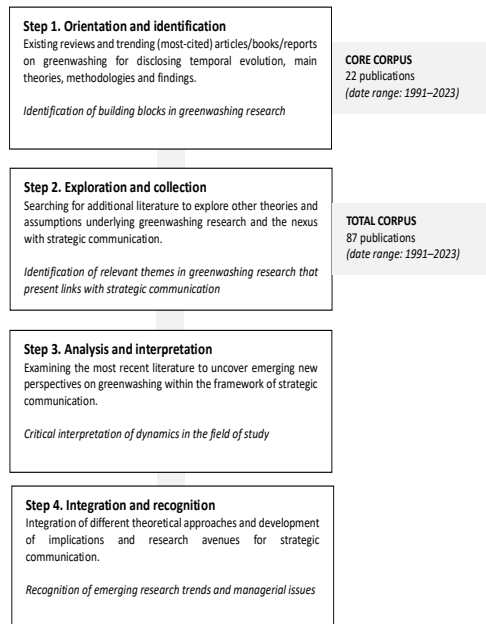
On these lines, a four-stage process was followed to develop the integrated review (see Figure 1):

- Phase 1: *Orientation and identification*;
- Phase 2: *Exploration and collection*;
- Phase 3: *Analysis and interpretation*;
- Phase 4: *Integration and recognition*.

The first phase (Orientation and identification) involved identifying an initial set of publications of interest, including books, book chapters, conference proceedings and journal articles. Criteria used to identify this first set of publications include the relevance (editorial placement) and popularity (most-cited) of publications, considering both Scopus and Google Scholar databases. As for the time horizon, a starting date (1991) related to the first academic use of the term 'greenwashing' was set. The initial corpus consists of 22 publications: 20 journal articles (both research papers and literature reviews), one book and one report. These publications from the first group were then analysed and summarised, paying particular attention to temporal evolution, authorship, theories, methodologies and primary findings reported in these studies. In the subsequent expansion of material and additional exploration of the literature (Phase 2: Exploration and collection), relevant themes in greenwashing research were selected based on the criteria that they had conceptual connections with strategic communication. These include constructs such as decoupling, legitimisation strategies, sense-making/sense-giving, etc. (these dimensions are presented and discussed in Section 3). The available material was thus expanded by

conducting specific searches (combining the aspects of greenwashing and deception with more specific ones of communication) in the principal academic databases and search engines, particularly Scopus and Google Scholar. In order to minimise the risk of data entropy and to streamline the interpretation of the findings, we ceased collecting additional material once we attained a satisfactory level of informative depth, as suggested by Snyder (2019).

Fig. 1: Research design of the study



Source: our elaboration

The first two phases helped identify the critical issues and essential elements in analysing the phenomenon of greenwashing, considering it a strategic issue. After completing Phase 3 (*Analysis and interpretation*), the review focused on integrating and examining the most recent literature to uncover emerging new perspectives on greenwashing within the framework of strategic communication. An inductive process was used to conduct the analysis (by mapping definitions, different theoretical lenses, methods, empirical approaches), thus providing a critical interpretation of current dynamics in this area while also pointing out emerging research trends and managerial issues that can inform future research and managerial practice.

3. Analysis of the results

The review highlights the lack of attention paid to the strategic communication perspective, meaning the communication process used by an organisation to fulfil its mission (Hallahan *et al.*, 2007). Explanations

of greenwashing behaviours tend to focus primarily on the supposed benefits obtainable from the dissonance between talk and action when not discovered by stakeholders rather than questioning the management of the actual processes that lead to such phenomena. For an in-depth analysis, the results were divided according to the main theoretical approaches and related central constructs used in greenwashing research.

3.1 Institutional and legitimacy theory

Studies adopting both institutional and legitimacy theories (Hahn and Lülfs, 2014; Marquis *et al.*, 2016; Testa *et al.*, 2018; Zharfpeykan, 2021) tend to explain greenwashing behaviours in the social, regulatory, normative, cognitive and/or cultural context in which the company operates, often without dwelling on the intentional or unintentional nature of the behaviours and communication process management. In these theoretical approaches, communication strategy is considered to be naturally oriented towards acquiring different forms of legitimacy (Palazzo and Scherer, 2006; Stratling, 2007), and in any case, essential to achieving legitimacy itself (“legitimacy management rests heavily on communication” - Suchman, 1995, p. 586). Greenwashing thus derives from companies’ efforts to maintain or extend legitimacy levels (Laufer, 2003).

For example, Hahn and Lülfs (2014) identified six legitimisation strategies adopted by companies (included in two primary stock indices, the Dow Jones and Dax) to avoid disclosing the negative aspects within their sustainability reports. It was emphasised that symbolic legitimisation strategies (strategies of marginalisation and abstraction) were the most widely used form in reports to influence stakeholder perceptions and gain legitimacy, even if they did not fully comply with the impartiality required by Global Reporting Initiative (GRI) guidelines. Similarly, in the tourism sector, Font *et al.* (2012) found that perceived threats to social legitimacy impacted some hospitality sector businesses and pushed them to provide self-referential disclosures to satisfy stakeholders.

3.2 Impression management

Studies drawing from the impression management literature align with a strategic approach to communication as they examine the strategies organisations use to influence stakeholder perceptions (Solomon *et al.*, 2013; Talbot and Boiral, 2015; Hassan *et al.*, 2020). Impression management studies have mainly sought to identify organisations’ strategies to shape stakeholder perceptions about them (Bansal and Clelland, 2004; Solomon *et al.*, 2013). To this end, greenwashing itself should be interpreted within this theoretical framework (Hassan *et al.*, 2020): impression management thus includes reporting and communication activities when perceived as artificially amplifying positive information while downplaying negative data on the company’s sustainability performance. Impression management techniques for sustainability communication have been classified into two main groups (Perks *et al.*, 2013; Boiral *et al.*, 2022): (a) proactive strategies, such as self-promotion, exemplification, acclamation,

etc., when companies exaggerate their own (alleged) sustainability efforts; (b) defensive tactics, for example, justifications, excuses etc., when companies tend to avoid taking responsibility for their wrong behaviours and/or irresponsible practices. These strategies can give rise to various deceptive communication solutions (Hamza and Jarboui, 2022), ranging from rhetorical and thematic manipulation to deception through visual and structural elements of the narrative², to the (false) attribution of performances (Merkl-Davies and Brennan, 2011).

3.3 Signalling theory

Based on signalling theory (Spence, 1973; Connelly *et al.*, 2011), companies oriented towards sustainability are more likely to disclose positive information about their sustainability activities to indicate their greater commitment to various stakeholders (Karaman *et al.*, 2020), unlike those with poor sustainability performance, who may find it costlier to implement the relevant signals (Habib and Hasan, 2019). In other words, according to this theoretical framework, the costs for companies that do not communicate honestly (i.e., greenwashers) will outweigh the benefits (Mahoney *et al.*, 2013), making the greenwashing behaviour ineffective.

More generally, studies adopting this theoretical approach focus on demonstrating a strong correlation between sustainability/CSR performance and communication/reporting, citing sectors such as energy (Karaman *et al.*, 2021) and logistics (Uyar *et al.*, 2020). Other studies (e.g., Garrido *et al.*, 2020) argue that the balance between signals is much more complex, with situations arising in which the transmission of information in specific contexts (e.g., absence of sanctions for greenwashers) can favour a tendency towards greenwashing because it depends on both the level of rewards and the expected costs for less sustainable companies (Seele and Gatti, 2017; Conte *et al.*, 2023).

3.4 Attribution theory

Studies adopting attribution theory focus on the consumer perspective, seeking to explain the various intrinsic and extrinsic motivations that lead to the perception of greenwashing behaviours (Nyilasy *et al.*, 2014; Ginder *et al.*, 2021). These studies provide important operational indications for strategic communication, as they demonstrate how different stakeholders actually process messages. This theoretical framework is ideal for understanding consumer responses to sustainability communication (Parguel *et al.*, 2011). Given this reasoning, individuals can process why certain companies use 'green' and/or CSR messages. Referring to Heider's (1944) work, attribution theory perspectives on greenwashing suggest two main motivations attributed to CSR communication (Parguel *et al.*, 2011;

² When greenwashing is based on non-verbal elements, it is called 'executional greenwashing'. This term refers to all other aspects of advertising announcements or communication messages that go beyond mere textual/verbal claims, such as images, sounds, evocative symbols of nature, etc., which could convey distorted perceptions regarding the company's actual sustainability commitment (Parguel *et al.*, 2015).

Nyilasy *et al.*, 2014; Ginder *et al.*, 2021): (a) intrinsic (or dispositional) motives, when individuals perceive an authentic commitment of the company to environmental and social issues; (b) extrinsic (or situational) motives, when consumers see the association between the company and sustainability factors as self-referential.

3.5 Communicative constitution of organisations

Unlike other approaches, the ‘communicative constitution of organisations’ (CCO) considers CSR communication and associated greenwashing as a dynamic process in which companies, institutions, stakeholders, etc., use various forms of communication to negotiate the meanings associated with CSR and sustainability. Specific ‘authoritative texts’ (such as CSR and sustainability reports) are therefore critical in shaping organisational activities and practices (Siano *et al.*, 2017). The influence of these communication artefacts can generate virtuous practices, such as aspirational talk (Schoeneborn and Trittin, 2013), in which even if the communication does not correspond to current practices, it can serve to stimulate positive organisational changes (Christensen *et al.*, 2010). According to Schoeneborn and Trittin (2013), not all CSR communication practices can be associated with greenwashing since even decoupled communication (i.e., a gap between words and actions) can result in positive outcomes. Although communication can be beneficial even when it does not reflect current practices, it is not easy to understand the conditions under which it is effective: it has been found that unrealistic objectives or practices that are not truly absorbed by organisational structures can result in even more unscrupulous forms of greenwashing, such as deceptive manipulation (Siano *et al.*, 2017)³.

In strategic terms, the constructivist perspective on greenwashing suggests the importance of understanding stakeholders’ actual participation in CSR activities and decisions. Other actors’ involvement and/or engagement can shape the meanings in CSR discourse, thus reducing the risk of self-referential practices or, even worse, unethical practices.

4. Strategic communication to prevent greenwashing: managerial implications and future research directions

As a result of our analysis, we examined how greenwashing has affected the core dimensions of strategic communication (organised listening, reflective communication, etc.) and what implications may be derived. Consistent with Zerfass *et al.* (2020), it should be clarified that greenwashing has the characteristics of a strategic issue because it stems from changes in factors of strategic complexity (primarily environmental and social factors). Greenwashing is, therefore, of specific interest to those dealing with strategic communication. Moreover, if strategic

³ Deceptive manipulation refers to the manipulation of business practices to back up green claims, such as, for example, Volkswagen’s development of a system to fraudulently alter CO2 emissions and support statements of leadership in sustainability (Siano *et al.*, 2017).

communication impacts the public sphere, it is of primary importance to understand the mechanisms through which it can be subject to accusations of greenwashing and how to prevent them.

The integrative literature review identified multiple theoretical approaches that enrich our understanding of the core processes of strategic communication that underlie greenwashing. These aspects of strategic communication are presented along with the main future research lines intersecting the research on greenwashing in Table 1.

Tab. 1: Implications and future research avenues

Core Processes of Strategic Communication	Research Lines	Description	Main Theoretical Approaches
Organised listening	Stakeholder engagement	Investigate how strategic communication can enhance genuine stakeholder engagement to build legitimacy and trust. Analyse the processes of jointly creating meaning with stakeholders by avoiding talk-action disconnection.	Stakeholder theory; legitimacy theory; CCO
Reflective communication	Legitimacy over time	Explore how strategic communication can support long-term legitimacy without falling into accusations of greenwashing	Legitimacy theory, CCO
Strategic communication decisions	Signal credibility	Study the impact of differentiated effects of CSR signals' visibility and cost on stakeholder perceptions and greenwashing risks.	Signalling theory
Operational communication decisions	Third-party endorsements	Analyse the role of third-party endorsements in mitigating scepticism and enhancing credibility in CSR communication.	Impression management; attribution theory; others
	Social media dynamics	Examine how social media and user-generated content affect perceptions of CSR communication and greenwashing.	

Source: our elaboration

Organised listening

From greenwashing studies drawing on legitimacy theory, it can be inferred, consistently with the arguments of Ihlen and Verhoeven (2015), that the most important task of strategic communication is to ensure that the organisation's mission is considered legitimate (Holmström *et al.*, 2009), with the best understanding between the organisation and the public as the basis. Criticalities in the organised listening process (Invernizzi, 2004) can compromise the understanding of stakeholders' distinctive features. Unidirectional approaches (Schultz and Wehmeier, 2010) or few contact points with stakeholders (Peloza and Falkenberg, 2009) not only limit collaboration with various stakeholders but also risk triggering processes of signification (sense-giving/sense-making) that then prove fragile when subjected to public scrutiny.

Regarding the need for organised listening that is genuine rather than superficial and that integrates processes of two-way symmetric communication (Morsing and Schultz, 2006), one should also consider

the implications of the CCO approach (Schoeneborn *et al.*, 2020). In this approach, the processes of jointly creating meaning always emerge from interactions between the parties involved. The CCO perspective emphasises that both internal and external stakeholders contribute to shaping organisational discourse through engaged dialogue and collaboration. A one-sided, top-down approach risks overlooking essential perspectives that could strengthen legitimacy and trust if meaningfully included in strategic communication processes.

Reflective communication

In reflective communication, this is even more evident, as it relies on organised listening activities to assist decision-makers in developing a signification framework for organisations by placing them in the public sphere (van Ruler and Verčič, 2005). Legitimacy cannot be achieved through improvised strategies, which may lead to greenwashing. Instead, it must be pursued communicatively to explore how companies and the public co-create meaning (Ihlen and Verhoeven, 2015). In terms of future research, it would be appropriate to investigate how strategic communication can support a certain level of legitimisation over time without incurring accusations of greenwashing. Such an analysis would also be helpful considering that accusations of greenwashing are more frequent when commitment to sustainability issues is perceived as a short-term promise (Pomering and Johnson, 2009; Kim and Lyon, 2015) and, therefore, the company's position is seen as opportunistic.

Strategic communication decisions (strategy formulation)

The decision-making elements downstream of strategic communication activities (strategic and operational communication decisions) also deserve to be rethought in light of the greenwashing 'emergency'.

Strategic communication decisions, through which the communication strategy is formulated, define the organisational reputation target level and the set of corporate identity resources (Siano *et al.*, 2013). Without proper elaboration of previous phases, such decisions risk creating the prerequisites for accusations of greenwashing. In this sense, signalling theory can shed light on the differentiated effects of the signals generated by the set of corporate identity resources in sustainability communication initiatives (Berrone *et al.*, 2017; Conte *et al.*, 2023). The main dimensions of signal visibility and cost are crucial to understanding the relevance of each signal for different types of stakeholders. Without such an evaluation, estimating target levels of reputation is complex. Future studies could investigate how specific CSR signals are likely to be perceived as inauthentic (i.e. at risk of greenwashing accusations) considering both the credibility of the signalling party (company/agency or communication consultant) and contextual factors (such as normative and regulatory pressures, sanctions against greenwashing, etc.).

Operational communication decisions (strategy implementation)

The execution of the communication strategy is the most critical phase for the risk of greenwashing precisely because it is continuously

subject to stakeholder assessment (Vollero, 2013). Both studies using impression management and those referring to attribution theory as a theoretical framework have provided extensive empirical evidence of how different stakeholders (and consumers in particular) perceive green claims and organisations' statements about sustainability. From a strategic communication perspective, the crucial issue is aligning the implementation of operational activities and specific tactics with what has been strategically developed (Zerfass *et al.*, 2020). In more detail, studies that have dealt with the lack of third-party endorsement (Parguel *et al.*, 2011) in CSR communication have highlighted risks (e.g., scepticism) resulting from incorrect operational choices, mainly when operating without providing specific supporting data or with excessive emphasis on secondary positive aspects (Vollero *et al.*, 2016; Gosselt *et al.*, 2019).

A possible direction for future research could be to integrate all levels of analysis (organisational and sectoral) using mixed methods that start with a quantitative analysis of stakeholder perceptions and then examine the content of corporate documents and materials (reports, ads, websites, social media, etc.), in order to assess the use and effectiveness of neutralisation techniques to reduce impressions of greenwashing (Talbot and Boiral, 2015; Boiral *et al.*, 2022). By combining quantitative and qualitative approaches, researchers could provide a more holistic understanding of how organisations communicate about sustainability initiatives and whether communication strategies help align words with actions or risk the perception of greenwashing. Such integrated analyses could offer valuable insights into improving strategic communication practices⁴.

Regarding strategy execution, the results of the present integrative review also draw attention to the choice of channels in intra- and inter-organisational dynamics. Adopting a constructivist communication perspective, the classical distinction between internal and external communication is ineffective (Schoeneborn and Trittin, 2013; Vollero, 2022). Since communication is constitutive of the organisation (Taylor and Van Every, 2000), any communicative act relating to the organisation is formative, regardless of whether it is produced internally (management, employees) or externally (customers, media, NGOs, other stakeholders). Consequently, corporate boundaries become less defined as third parties can interact in dialogues with organisational members and shape practices related to CSR and sustainability. The choice of communication channels must consider the porous nature of boundaries and the cooperative dynamic between internal and external communicative actions.

An exciting challenge for strategic communication researchers could be to deepen the understanding of how social dynamics and communicative interactions reduce (or amplify) the level of greenwashing, also considering the use of social media (and associated user-generated content), which constitutes a natural extension of the CSR communication mix (Capriotti, 2011; Vollero *et al.*, 2021). Social platforms enable broader stakeholder participation and influence in organisational discourse through sharing,

⁴ Neutralisation techniques constitute the impression management tactics used to rationalise, through socially acceptable arguments, the occurrence of incorrect behaviours or negative impacts.

commenting and networking. Examining how transparency, authentic engagement and neutralisation techniques play out in these contexts could provide valuable insights into supporting more sustainable and legitimate strategic CSR communication practices over time.

5. Beyond greenwashing: between strategic silence and (eco)system dynamics

Building upon the theoretical foundations and managerial implications discussed in the previous sections, this section further explores two critical areas: the concept of 'strategic silence', or 'greenhushing', and the systemic dynamics of greenwashing. These areas further illuminate the complexities of strategic communication in the context of sustainability and offer new avenues for research and managerial practice.

In the previous section, we discussed the importance of organised listening, reflective communication, and strategic communication decisions to mitigate the risks of greenwashing. However, some companies adopt a different strategy to avoid the risks associated with sustainability communication: strategic silence or greenhushing. This involves deliberately decreasing their exposure and commitment to sustainability issues in terms of communication. Some authors (Carlos and Lewis, 2018; Ginder *et al.*, 2021) have indeed wondered whether it would not be better for companies to reduce expectations-which, if not met, increase the risks of being accused of greenwashing-simply by avoiding communicating their sustainability activities. In essence, greenhushing consists of an 'inertia strategy' for companies that fear stakeholder judgement of their sustainability initiatives to avoid being put in the spotlight of the media, activists, pundits or researchers. This deliberate inertia is not that rare among companies. In a longitudinal study of companies included in the DJSI, Carlos and Lewis (2018) found that some companies were less likely to exhibit sustainability certifications when they perceived a threat to their legitimacy or reputation.

Consequently, these companies openly chose to reduce communication exposure to avoid greenwashing accusations from potential contradictions in claims decisive for their inclusion in sustainability indexes. The resulting strategic silence reflects a deliberate strategy to resist stakeholder demands. Essentially, these companies avoid any reaction through strategic silence, ignoring these non-market demands (Carlos and Lewis, 2018; Hajmohammad *et al.*, 2021).

A telling example is reported by Waldron *et al.* (2013), who examined the fish procurement practices of the food industry and their response to Greenpeace initiatives to improve supply chain sustainability. Costco, one of the largest American retail corporations for food products, deliberately chose not to respond to the Greenpeace initiative, while other companies yielded to activist demands (Hajmohammad *et al.*, 2021). Similar examples can also be found in the tourism and hospitality sector: Font *et al.* (2017) found that small rural tourism businesses in the Peak District National Park (UK) communicated less than one-third of their sustainability

practices and instead focused on customer experience and the hedonistic attractions of the landscapes, thus avoiding any sense of guilt for tourists visiting these uncontaminated areas.

Greenhushing, therefore, appears as a reaction to growing consumer scepticism and distrust and to the fear of possible backlash from activist protests (Ginder *et al.*, 2021). Knowledge of stakeholder reactions to greenhushing practices is relatively scarce, but the potential effects of these practices cannot be underestimated. When stakeholders perceive strategic silence positions positively (Ginder *et al.*, 2021; Christis *et al.*, 2021), proactive sustainability policies are likely to slow down, as they do not produce additional rewards compared to a discreet positioning on sustainability. On the other hand, industry-level mechanisms and generalised control by different stakeholders could quickly signal companies that choose to be explicitly silent (even if authentically sustainable) and companies that choose silence to mask performance inadequacies regarding social and environmental performance. In the latter case, it is not unlikely that the adverse effects of misleading strategic silence will be similar to those observed for other greenwashing practices.

Beyond individual company actions, the concept of greenwashing needs to be understood within a broader systemic context to adopt an effective strategic communication approach. As highlighted in various studies, the responsibilities attributed to companies often extend beyond their direct actions to include those of their suppliers and other stakeholders (Schrempf-Stirling and Palazzo, 2016). For example, the study by Pizzetti *et al.* (2021) considers greenwashing along the supply chain and identifies a new type of greenwashing: ‘vicarious greenwashing’, which occurs when a company makes claims about its sustainability performance, but these statements are inconsistent with the unethical behaviour of a supplier. Despite the company’s lack of direct responsibility for the supplier’s behaviour, blame can still fall on the company, especially if it did not adequately monitor the supplier’s wrongful actions (Pizzetti *et al.*, 2021).

The expansion of responsibilities must also be viewed from an industry perspective, as greenwashing accusations can quickly transfer from one producer to competing companies, as happened, for example, after the Volkswagen case to the automotive sector (Boiral *et al.*, 2022) or as happens with accusations of poor sustainability that involve all fast fashion companies (Changing Markets, 2021). This implies the need to consider strategic communication responses at the systemic-industry level.

In summary, the phenomenon of greenwashing presents complex challenges for strategic communication. Addressing these challenges requires an integrative approach encompassing individual and systemic perspectives. This paper highlights the need for strategic communication managers to foster transparency, stakeholder engagement, and collaborative efforts across the entire supply chain and industry ecosystems. By doing so, organisations can better navigate the complexities of sustainability communication, mitigate the risks of greenwashing, and contribute to a more sustainable and trustworthy corporate environment. By integrating theoretical perspectives and empirical findings, researchers can develop

more comprehensive frameworks that inform both academic debates and practical applications in sustainability communication.

Therefore, strategic communication managers should open up to co-creating value frameworks and shared procedures among the actors of the relevant ecosystems to reduce the risk of expanded greenwashing and the related reputational damages to entire production chains. In this direction, a strategic communication approach seems particularly appropriate and can act as a facilitation mechanism for making explicit the purposes of an ecosystem in which the various actors (industry companies, suppliers, consumer associations, and regulatory bodies) contribute to determining the conditions and defining the role that each can play in the ecological transition we are facing.

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 Strategic communication
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 Theoretical reflections and
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