



GREEN “UNDER-COMMUNICATION:” A SYSTEMATIC LITERATURE REVIEW ON GREENHUSHING¹



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Purpose: Our paper explores how “not communicating” or “under communicating” is addressed in academic literature and the resulting impact on sustainability marketing and communication.

Design/methodology/approach: This study conducted a systematic literature review with 21 documents, exploring the effects of under-communication on sustainability marketing and consumer behavior considering the terminology of “greenblushing,” “silent green,” and “silent sustainability” firms. We search documents published until December 2023 on Web of Science (WoS), Scopus, and Google Scholar.

Findings: The studies follow three main discussions: the categorization regarding companies’ sustainability communication versus commitment, the effects of greenhushing as a message style, and why companies choose not to disclose their sustainability efforts.

Theoretical/methodological contributions: This study proposes a future research agenda and encourages thoughtful consideration of the practical and theoretical aspects of understanding the “why,” “how,” and “when” companies should not communicate.

Relevance and originality: Considering that communication is the connection between the company and consumers, not communicating can be considered counterintuitive. Recognized as the opposite of greenwashing, greenhushing has been gaining space in academic discussions.

Keywords: Greenblushing. Greenhushing. Silent firms. Sustainability communication. Systematic review.

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1 Introduction

Environmental awareness is increasingly becoming a relevant topic. Currently, companies are experiencing much more pressure to change their behavior and fit under a “sustainability” label, indicating their social and environmental responsibility. Sustainability expressions gained a unique space in the business and management areas, working as a wake-up call not only to the curiosity and interest of stakeholders but also to the skepticism and distrust of consumers. Greenwashing strategies made consumers question the legitimacy of sustainability claims (Delmas & Burbano, 2011; Farooq & Wicaksono, 2021).

Sustainability can have different meanings, considering the context and how people see this idea (Banerjee, 2003). Additionally, it can be studied under an instrumental logic (Gold & Schleper, 2017), as an ongoing practice intrinsic to an organization’s daily operations (Jennings & Zandbergen, 1995), as a social process with a more transformative approach (Fritz & Silva, 2018), or even as an organizational capability, a mean to achieve an end (Amui et al., 2017).

From a marketing standpoint, Baldassarre and Campo (2016) suggest that sustainability can be used to achieve different and various goals in stakeholder relationships, such as sharing the firms’ values and activities. Meanwhile, many vocal green firms truly advocate and publicize their involvement with sustainable efforts (Delmas & Burbano, 2011); not all companies are engaged in this communication, even though they are highly committed to sustainable issues. This strategy of under-communicating green efforts is called greenhushing (Falchi et al., 2022; Font et al., 2017).

The expression *greenhushing* was coined in 2008 by a brand strategist, Jerry Stifelman, and introduced by Font et al. (2017) in the academic setting. While the current body of literature may not be as extensive as other terms, such as “greenwashing,” scholars and business leaders are growing interested in this strategy. Past studies have identified “greenwashing” (i.e., portraying oneself as committed to sustainability without actually being so) and “greenhushing” (i.e., being committed to sustainability but not communicating it) as opposites on the same continuum (Baldassarre & Campo, 2016; Kutzschbach et al., 2021).

The greenhushing strategy, which involves not publicizing sustainability efforts, builds consumer trust more effectively than greenwashing, where companies use persuasive but incoherent sustainability claims. Overall, communication approaches that rely on greenwashing are generally perceived as less effective compared to other strategies (Christis & Wang, 2021; Dewandini et al., 2022). Greenwashing deceives consumers and fosters skepticism,

compromising the credibility of genuine sustainability efforts. This practice encourages stakeholders to be more discerning in distinguishing between authentic and false claims, hindering genuinely sustainable companies from establishing trust and receiving the recognition they deserve. Not communicating – known as greenhushing – aims to avoid deceptive communication.

Developing effective communication strategies in an environmentally conscious organization is the key to achieving a coherent sustainability discourse (Font et al., 2017). However, there is a significant gap in the academic literature regarding the phenomenon of greenhushing, specifically in understanding the disparity between customers’ perceptions and the actual sustainability performance of companies (Baldassarre & Campo, 2016). The literature is still in the early stages of exploring the detrimental effects of this gap and the underlying motivations that drive firms to adopt greenhushing strategies, highlighting the need for further research to comprehend how these strategies impact both stakeholder engagement and the overall effectiveness of sustainability initiatives.

As a phenomenon that remains overlooked (Falchi et al., 2022), the purpose of this study is to, through a systematic literature review, explore and have a better in-depth understanding of greenhushing strategies and the underlying motives why companies comply with them. The chosen approach involves thoroughly analyzing existing literature to identify gaps, inconsistencies, and potential areas for further research. This method allows for a comprehensive and rigorous understanding of the complex relationship between the concepts. Besides, this method creates a foundation to advance knowledge regarding the topic of study and facilitates future theory development (Snyder, 2019).

Addressing an underdeveloped theme in which literature still needs to be better understood and meticulously reviewing the existing body of knowledge about greenhushing, our paper explores how “not communicating” or “under communicating” is being studied and their implications for sustainability marketing and communication. To advance the study of how communication strategies, or the lack of them, can shape perceptions and outcomes in corporate sustainability, this paper delves into the critical consequences of the under-communication of sustainable practices.

Regarding the structure and organization of the present paper, the theoretical background and the systematic literature review methodology are described in the next chapters. Next, the data analysis is presented using descriptive and content analysis. Lastly, the author discusses the study findings, limitations, and a future research agenda.

2 Theoretical background

The literature on sustainability communication is becoming increasingly popular, reflecting the academic community’s response to global environmental and business challenges (Golob et al., 2023). This highlights the increasing relevance of understanding how companies convey their sustainability messages within the academic field.

Sustainability communication is seen as multidimensional, consisting of “sustainability information” and “sustainability motivation and engagement” (Čuić Tanković & Mušanović, 2022). Firms create strategies and practices aimed at shaping, supporting, and enhancing their corporate image regarding their environmental and social conduct while also promoting their products or services and fostering open dialogue with society (Da Giau et al., 2016).

It is important to raise awareness about environmental concerns and societal values, and the primary goal of sustainable communication is to integrate these issues (Godemann & Michelsen, 2011). However, firms can follow different paths when it comes to sustainability disclosure, being a voluntary strategy as an act of proactively sharing their sustainability practices or an idea that arises from the pressure by stakeholders for companies to be perceived as green and sustainable brands (Bendig et al., 2023). In response to this pressure, many organizations strategically craft communication to maintain appearances, projecting an image of sustainability that may not fully align with their performance. This approach allows the firm to assist in achieving a competitive edge and attracting environmentally conscious consumers, while satisfying stakeholder expectations without necessarily committing to the substantial changes required for genuine sustainability, leading to a potential disconnect between their communicated intentions and their actual impact, being considered as a form of greenwashing (Delmas & Burbano, 2011; Szabo & Webster, 2021).

Considering the connection between a company’s environmental commitment and communication strategy, some authors propose that four categories arise. This occurs due to variations in both the degree of communication and sustainable performance, influenced by factors prompting companies to embrace diverse strategies and approaches (Baldassare & Campo, 2016; Delmas & Burbano, 2011). Firstly, there are companies highly committed to sustainability but engage in low communication, failing to leverage it as a marketing opportunity. Secondly, there are those with low commitment and communication, often indicating a lack of awareness regarding the strategic importance of sustainability. On the other

hand, there are the ones where high communication is employed with high commitment as a strategic approach, viewed as a crucial part of corporate strategy in which companies are transparent about their efforts. Lastly, some merely present themselves as sustainable, exhibiting low commitment but with high communication, adopting an opportunistic approach commonly recognized as a greenwashing strategy.

This study will focus mainly on Greenhushing strategies, a phenomenon in which companies highly committed to sustainable practices choose to downplay or omit the communication of these initiatives in their strategy (Baldassare & Campo, 2016). Unlike greenwashing, which exaggerates environmental efforts, greenhushing involves the intentional under-communication of positive actions due to fears of criticism, skepticism, or increased public scrutiny (Font et al., 2017; Ettinger et al., 2021; Falchi et al., 2022). This practice is adopted by companies that, despite their genuine commitment to sustainability, prefer to maintain a more discreet approach.

The study of greenhushing has gained attention by exploring why companies avoid promoting their environmental practices. Focusing on greenhushing in a systematic literature review is essential to understand how this strategy impacts consumer trust and reputation-building while offering a broader perspective on the different approaches to sustainability communication.

3 Method

We conducted a domain-based systematic literature review to understand better the existing greenhushing literature (Paul & Criado, 2020). Our main aim was to identify key ideas and findings around this novel subject over the years (Fisch & Block, 2018). For structuring our review, we followed the Preferred Reporting Items for Systematic Reviews and Meta-analyses (PRISMA) approach and the steps proposed by Tranfield et al. (2003) – Planning, Conducting, and Reporting.

To ensure a systematic review with a comprehensive and broad range coverage of studies, two databases were primarily selected: Scopus and Web of Science (WoS). We chose them because they are globally recognized and competitive citation databases, the longest-standing platforms providing extensive coverage of studies and citation data (Martín-Martín et al., 2021; Zhu & Liu, 2020). Scopus and WoS are also the most comprehensive curated databases for coverage of scientific journals (Singh et al., 2021). Hence, relying on both addressed ethical concerns regarding minimizing publication bias while enhancing reliability

and validity since they have a multidisciplinary body of literature. As a complement, our study applied a second search protocol on Google Scholar, a wide-ranging and comprehensive source (Martín-Martín et al., 2021). Our review does not consider a limited period for searching articles. Our database included all results published until December 2023. From January to May 2024, relevant study information was identified, selected, and extracted following pre-established criteria and subsequently analyzed.

Since the literature on this topic is still growing, a scoping process was first made to map the main terms and synonyms related to greenhushing. Our prior investigation observed that terms such as “greenblushing,” “silent green,” and “silent sustainability” were also terms used to refer to greenhushing strategies. Hence, to identify and search papers related to the research topic, combining these synonyms were considered in the databases’ search strings on articles’ titles, abstracts, and keywords. Given the small number of documents found in the search, we decided not to make any filter, analyzing all the results. Our results include academic articles, conference proceedings, books, and chapters, as well as theoretical and empirical research. Interestingly, the study area was also not limited to “Business and Management” since the initial scoping showed that the literature focused on other areas (e.g., Social Sciences, Environmental Science, and Materials Science). Thus, this study considered an interdisciplinary perspective.

Since English is the most widely used language in global scientific communication, only articles written in this language were selected. This approach was deemed sufficient to capture a broad range of data and perspectives, meeting the objectives of the systematic review without compromising the integrity of the results, even though relevant studies published in other languages may be excluded. However, additionally, given that many of the leading scientific journals on the subject are published in English, the research was not only focused on sourcing influential and widely recognized texts but also aimed to make the systematic review accessible to the international community (Table 1).

Table 1

Search protocol A

Database	Description – Research query	Nº of documents
Scopus	TITLE-ABS-KEY (“greenhushing” OR “green hushing” OR “greenblushing” OR “green blushing” OR “silent green” OR “silent sustainability”)	19
Web of Science	TS = (“greenhushing” OR “green hushing” OR “greenblushing” OR “green blushing” OR “silent green” OR “silent sustainability”)	13
Duplicated documents (excluded)		13
Total documents for screening		19
Abstract screening – Documents discussing “greenhushing” as an under-communication strategy		11

In “Research Protocol A,” we found 11 studies addressing greenhushing as an under-communication strategy. After the screening, eight studies outside the scope were excluded from the database since they did not address the theme focus of our research. The eight papers excluded from the database comprise ideas unrelated to sustainability communication (e.g., Kelly & van Norren, 1977; Poleshko et al., 2010).

To expand the number of articles in our database, we explored scientific papers that used Font et al. (2017) as one of their references. Font’s article was the first to mention “greenhushing” and became an essential reference for authors studying this topic. In a search in Google Scholar, 223 documents were cited by Font et al. (2017). The abstracts of these 223 documents were analyzed qualitatively to identify potential studies to be added to our database, conduct some quality validation processes, and determine if they were meeting the expected criteria and themes that would be studied (i.e., focused on sustainability communication). We identified eight new relevant documents (Table 2).

Table 2

Search protocol B

Database	Description	Nº of documents
Google Scholar	Search of articles that cited Font et al. (2017) – “Greenhushing: the deliberate under communicating of sustainability practices by tourism businesses”	223 documents
Abstract screening – Documents discussing “greenhushing” as an under-communication strategy		We discovered 8 relevant documents not covered by Protocol A.

Note. The research was conducted on February 26th, 2024.

After the “Search protocol B,” we analyzed the 19 articles found. Among them, we observed two essential references regarding sustainability communication. The two identified documents do not mention the terms *greenhushing* or *greenblushing*. Delmas and Burbano (2011) refer to greenhushing as *silent green firms*. On the other hand, Baldassarre and Campo (2016) refer to greenhushing as *translucent companies*. Considering that these articles add to sustainability communication (and under-communication), both papers were included in our analysis. Our final database resulted in 21 documents.

There is no consensus in the literature about the minimum number of records to be covered in a systematic review. However, besides reviewing the existing work about a specific topic studied, a systematic review can also shed light on the “absence of data,” emphasizing the necessity for additional research (Hiebl, 2023). Hence, the primary goal of reviewing the entire body of knowledge about greenhushing will be accomplished despite the limited number of articles included.

A descriptive analysis was performed using the interactive web interface from the RStudio® Bibliometrics package – Biblioshiny – and the software VOSviewer. Along with content analysis, a flexible method to analyze data from qualitative systematic reviews using codes is one of the process’s crucial steps (Finfgeld-Connett, 2014). Hence, the content analysis was conducted using the MAXQDA® software (Gizzi & Rädiker, 2021) following a deductive, concept-driven approach that assigns the reading process according to predetermined codes (Kuckartz, 2019).

The analysis protocol was developed based on a structured review (Paul & Criado, 2020), focusing on mapping nomenclatures, constructs, methods, and theories to explore the research topic. Thus, ten codes were planned to understand better the scope of greenhushing documents: 1) the title of the document; 2) the source where it was published; 3) the year of publication; 4) the research question; 5) the theoretical approach used to explain the phenomena; 6) the nomenclatures and synonyms of Greenhushing; 7) the context under investigation; 8) the hypothesis developed (if applicable); 9) the methodology applied; and finally, 10) the most relevant findings. Based on this pre-codification, we structured the outcomes while considering the main ideas and thematic patterns.

4 Main results

The findings from our research provide a more comprehensive understanding of greenhushing as a communication strategy. Our analysis was structured around descriptive and content results.

4.1 Descriptive analysis

The dataset for this systematic literature review consists of 21 documents. Twenty of these are academic papers published across 17 different journals, covering areas such as Business, Management, and Accounting (13), Social Sciences (8), Environmental Science (3), Energy (2), Economics, Econometrics, and Finance (1), Arts and Humanities (1), and Psychology (1). One document was published as a book chapter (Thakur et al., 2023).

The journals *Sustainability* (3 papers), *Business Strategy and the Environment* (2 papers), and *Journal of Sustainable Tourism* (2 papers) have published the most on this topic. Considering the range of publication years (2011 – 2023), around 80% of the documents have been published in the recent five years (2019 – 2023). Table 3 summarizes the journals, the number of articles per journal, and the years of publication.

Table 3

Summary of Sources and Number of Publications Per Year

Source	H- index	ABS	Year of publication										Total
			2011	2016	2017	2018	2019	2020	2021	2022	2023		
Sustainability	136	NA					1	1	1			3	
Business Strategy and the Environmental	131	3					1		1			2	
Journal of Sustainable Tourism	127	3			2							2	
Administrative Sciences	28	NA							1			1	
Business Horizons	106	2		1								1	
California Management Review	147	3	1									1	
Journal of Business and Technical Communication	43	NA			1							1	
Journal of Business Ethics	229	3							1			1	
Journal of Cleaner Production	268	2							1			1	
Journal of Hospitality and Tourism Insights	17	NA						1				1	
Journal of Management & Organization	43	2									1	1	

Journal of Place Management and Development	34	2								1		1
Journal of Travel Research	159	4					1					1
Jurnal Kepariwisata: Destinasi, Hospitalitas dan Perjalanan	NA	NA								1		1
Psychology and Marketing	133	3								1		1
Tourism Management Perspectives	69	2									1	1
Handbook of Evidence Based Management Practices in Business	NA	NA									1	1
Total			1	1	2	1	2	3	5	3	3	21

While the subject is still gaining traction in academic circles, 55% of the articles were featured in high-impact journals in the 2021 Academic Journal Guide (ABS). Of these, 54.5% were in journals categorized as ABS 3 or 4. This highlights the growing significance of the topic and indicates that well-respected publications with substantial academic and scientific influence are willing to delve into the implications of greenhushing.

The dataset analysis reveals that 50 authors contributed to the papers. The United Kingdom and the United States emerged with the highest proportion of corresponding authors. This could reflect in some insights about how the academy still focuses on a Western view of thematic approaches, being a possibility for future research to engage in studies from non-Western contexts.

Among the most referenced articles in our database, the paper of Delmas and Burbano (2011) leads with 2,705 citations. Following this, more recent works by Baldassarre and Campo (2016), De Jong, Harkink, and Barth (2018), Font, Elgammal and Lamond (2017), and Ginder, Kwon, and Byun (2021) also stand out (Table 4).

Table 4

5 Most Cited Papers in the Dataset

Title	Authors	Journal	Year	No. of citations
The Drivers of Greenwashing	Delmas and Burbano	California Management Review	2011	2705
Making Green Stuff? Effects of Corporate Greenwashing on Consumers	De Jong, Harkink, and Barth	Journal of Business and Technical Communication	2018	231
Greenhushing: the deliberate under communicating of sustainability practices by tourism businesses	Font, Elgammal, and Lamond	Journal of Sustainable Tourism	2017	224
Sustainability as a marketing tool: To be or to appear to be?	Baldassarre and Campo	Business Horizons	2016	133

Effects of Internal–External Congruence-Based CSR Positioning: An Attribution Theory Approach	Ginder, Kwon, and Byun	Journal of Business Ethics	2021	108
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Note. Number of citations according to Google Scholar on March 3rd, 2024

Analyzing the most frequent terms is an exciting process to gain insight into how the field behaves towards different narratives about the same thematic approach. Noticeably, “communication” was the most used word among the studies, which is coherent, considering that the greenhushing strategy concerns firms poorly engaging in sustainability communication regarding their actual practice (Font et al., 2017) (Figure 1).

Figure 1

The most used nomenclature word cloud



Based on our database, 50% of the studies focus on the tourism context. Interestingly, due to the consumer experiential context, this industry often tends to downplay or not disclose its sustainability strategies. Vacationers typically do not want reminders about their environmental responsibilities. Some research connects this trend to self-indulgence (Ettinger et al., 2021), while under-communication is related to reducing consumer guilt (Font et al., 2017). As the primary offerings of these businesses do not usually align with sustainability, promoting sustainable initiatives could potentially distract and inadvertently create negative feelings (Falchi et al., 2022).

Another topic that raised significant attention was “Corporate Social Responsibility,” which also included keywords such as “sustainable development,” “sustainability,” and “environmental economics.” Regarding this aspect, greenhushing has the potential to be seen

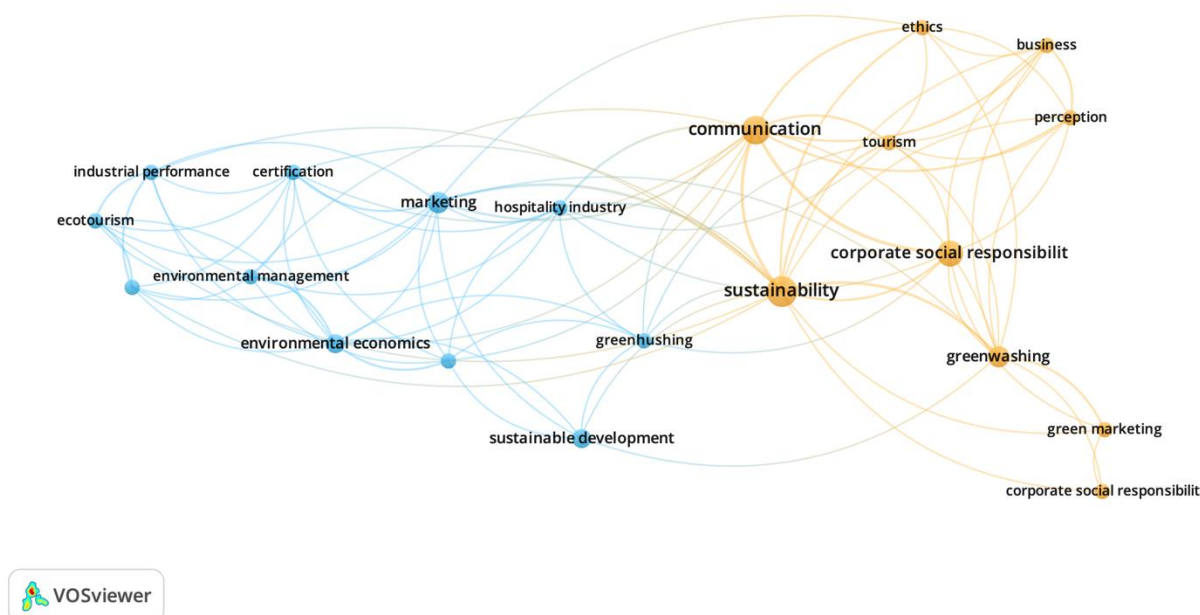
as a CSR communication position with different levels and nuances, from a discreet and uniform type, even to a “washing position” (Ginder et al., 2021).

Lastly, the keyword “perception” holds significant weight on the word map. Consumer perception shapes their journey with the company, influencing how they receive communications. Falchi, Grolleau, and Mzoughi (2022) suggest that making a corporation eco-friendly is often viewed not as a journey but as a destination. If the intended goal is not achieved, communication issues may arise.

Considering this contextualization, we use the software VOSviewer to understand the relationships among the keywords (Figure 2). Two main clusters emerge: one related to corporate aspects such as industrial performance, ecotourism, certification, and sustainable development (blue area), and the other associated with CSR, sustainability communication, and consumer perception (orange area). An important insight is that “greenwashing” was used in the keywords (authors’ keywords or index keywords) of four papers, which evidences the relationship among terms.

Figure 2

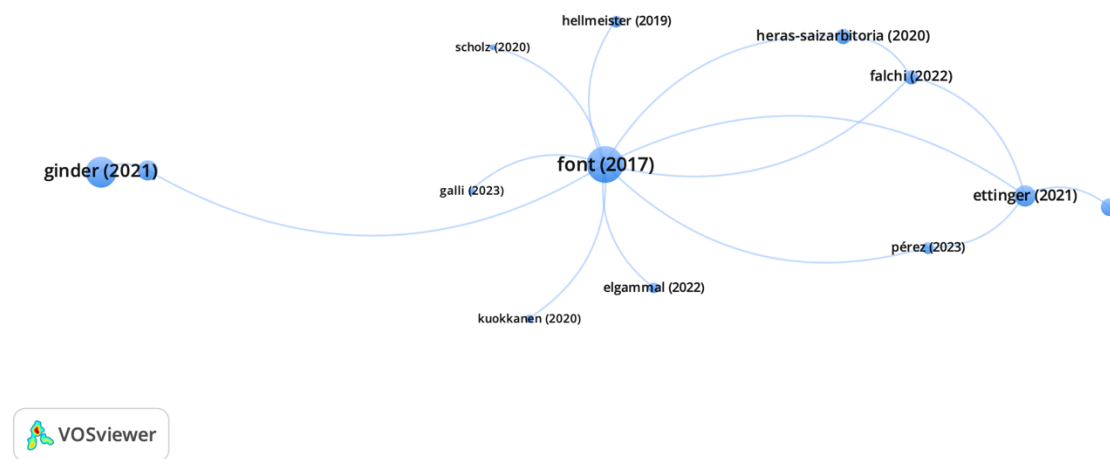
Keywords Relationship – Co-occurrence (all keywords)



To comprehend database relationships among the documents, we observe the citation map considering the relatedness of documents in our database, specifically how they cite each other (Figure 3). The paper of Font et al. (2017) has a central role as an essential reference on greenhushing. They applied a mixed-methods approach to understanding the phenomenon from the interpretivist perspective.

Figure 3

Citation analysis



Finally, it is identified that six papers in the database use a theoretical approach, while 15 follow an empirical approach, applying quantitative (9 papers), qualitative (3 papers), and mixed-methods research (3 papers) (Appendix A).

4.2 Content analysis

In the content analysis, we arranged predefined codes using MAXQDA® software. We also focused on central topics to understanding greenhushing, enabling a more in-depth analysis.

4.2.1 Categories of CSR Communication

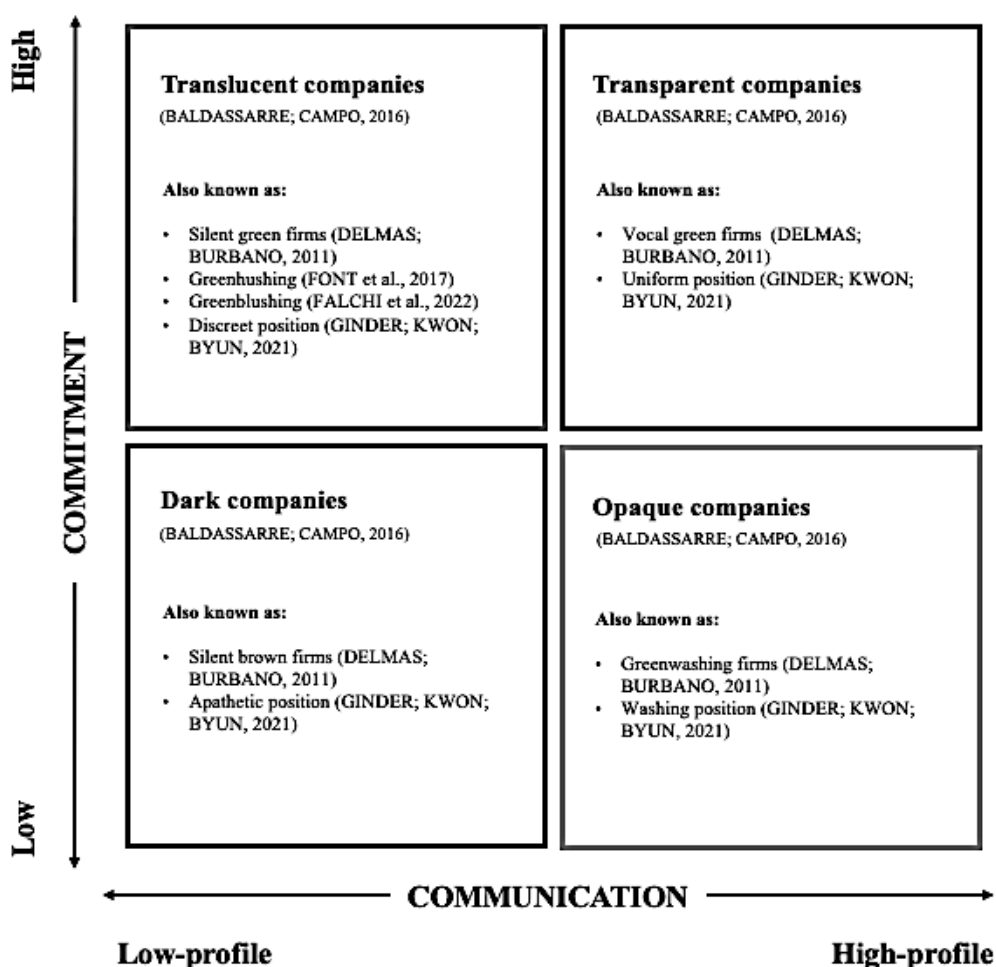
Considering the relationship between a company’s environmental commitment and communication strategy, most authors rely on the classifications proposed by Delmas and

Burbano (2011), Baldassarre and Campo (2016), and Ginder, Kwon, and Byun (2021). They classify companies' commitment and communication into four categories, providing valuable insights, especially into mismatched relationships such as greenwashing and greenhushing.

Upon comparing the terminologies, we recognize that “Transparent companies” (Baldassarre & Campo, 2016) correspond with “Vocal green firms” (Delmas & Burbano, 2011) and “Uniform positions” (Ginder et al., 2021). Likewise, “Opaque companies” (Baldassarre & Campo, 2016) match up with “Vocal brown firms” (Delmas & Burbano, 2011), “Washing position” (Ginder et al., 2021), and “Greenwashing.” In its turn, “Translucent companies” (Baldassarre & Campo, 2016) have parallels with “Silent green firms” (Delmas & Burbano, 2011), “Discreet position” (Ginder et al., 2021), and “Greenhushing” (Figure 4).

Figure 4

Matrix of Nomenclatures Regarding Companies' Sustainability Communication and Commitment



The expression greenhushing is consistent across different authors. Other terms like greenblushing, silent, timid, discreet, and “green muting” are used interchangeably. This examination of terminology shows that while different terms are used, they share a common conceptual foundation. However, greenhushing is addressed in various manners. Some papers describe it as a strategy (Dewandini et al., 2022; Ginder et al., 2021), others as a message style (Christis & Wang, 2021), or even as a phenomenon (Font et al., 2017).

Most of the papers did not address a theoretical approach to explain the phenomena of greenhushing (Table 5). However, the ones that did tie the strategy to a theory were most commonly associated with the Attribution Theory (Christis & Wang, 2021; Ginder et al., 2021).

Table 5

Theoretical Approach

Theory	Definition	Relation to Greenhushing	Authors
Attribution Theory	Assigns causes to behaviors based on internal or external factors.	Consumers may attribute extrinsic motivation when companies communicate discreetly.	Christis & Wang (2021)
Resource-Based Theory	Focuses on internal capabilities to achieve competitive advantage.	Companies may use greenhushing as a way to protect their strategic resources.	Christis & Wang (2021)
Cognitive Dissonance Theory	Incompatibility between beliefs and behaviors leads to psychological discomfort.	Greenhushing may minimize consumer discomfort related to sustainability.	Ettinger et al. (2021)

The Attribution Theory assigns causality between external and internal factors to behavioral intentions. Furthermore, attribution is a process that causes inferences (Heider, 1958; Kelley & Michela, 1980) and leads to a psychological framework for understanding the causes and motivations that guide actions. Hence, the relationship with greenhushing occurs since consumers will attribute internal or external motivational factors to a firm’s communication of sustainable efforts. For instance, when firms behave in a greenhushing/more discreet way, the extrinsic motivation from consumers is lowered (Ginder et al., 2021).

The Resource-Based Theory (Christis & Wang, 2021) was also used, as well as the Social Psychological Theory of Tourism Motivation associated with the Cognitive Dissonance

Theory (Ettinger et al., 2021). The resources and capabilities of a firm have a role in achieving sustainable competitive advantage, as the Resource-Based Theory addresses (Barney, 1991). Hence, many companies engage in a more sustainable strategy to provide value to stakeholders. When it comes to the under-communication of these practices, this theory framework helps to identify and support how to communicate sustainable resources more effectively, showcasing a firm’s commitment to sustainability efforts.

Interestingly, the Social Psychological Theory of Tourism Motivation associated with the Cognitive Dissonance Theory elucidates how individuals normally behave in a holiday/tourist situation. Regarding greenhushing, these theories support the idea that this communication strategy requests lower customers’ proactive involvement (Ettinger et al., 2021) – a concept related to consumers’ self-indulgence.

4.2.2 Consumer responses to different message appeals

Greenhushing is often mentioned as the antithesis of greenwashing (Acuti et al., 2022; Ettinger et al., 2021). Greenwashing has garnered more attention as it showcases companies’ attempts to mislead consumers with claims of sustainability that they do not apply. On the other hand, greenhushing presents a unique challenge for researchers because it focuses on under-communicated companies’ eco-friendly actions. Since marketing communications largely shape consumer perceptions, this absence of communication creates a gap in consumer understanding, product knowledge, and research applicability. After all, “How can we study ideas that are not communicated?”

Previous studies addressing greenhushing have compared the “under-communication” message appeal to greenwashing, uniform messages, apathetic messages, silent brown firms, and vocal green firms (De Jong et al., 2018; Dewandini et al., 2022; Ginder et al., 2021).

Upon examining the research methodologies, more than 50% of the studies in our database adopted a quantitative approach (e.g., Christis & Wang, 2021; Ginder et al., 2021). Five have emphasized experimental research. As an experimental condition, greenhushing is manipulated as a lack of information about companies’ sustainability activities (Christis & Wang, 2021; De Jong et al., 2018; Ettinger et al., 2021) and a lack of persuasive content regarding sustainability initiatives (Dewandini et al., 2022).

The results of these studies suggest that the greenhushing strategy – not communicating the sustainability initiatives – arouses consumer trust when compared to greenwashing

situations – e.g., persuasive appeals related to sustainability (Christis & Wang, 2021; Dewandini et al., 2022). In general, communication strategies based on greenwashing are seen as less effective when compared to other message appeals (e.g., greenhushing, vocal green, and uniform) (Christis & Wang, 2021).

De Jong, Harkink, and Barth (2018) indicate that consumers are likelier to purchase from companies that practice greenhushing and vocal green initiatives than those involved in greenwashing or silent brown operations. Studies generally did not identify significant differences between greenhushing and vocal green firms – also called uniform communications (Christis & Wang, 2021; De Jong et al., 2018).

The message style for communication sustainability efforts could impact consumer perceptions (Table 6). Ettinger et al. (2020) suggest that perception mediates the relationship between the type of CSR communication and consumers’ attitudes towards a company (e.g., purchase intention), meaning that how a firm publicizes its sustainability efforts can be perceived differently. For instance, previous studies suggest that different message appeals can increase consumer skepticism regarding the disseminated message and the advertising company (Acuti et al., 2022; Christis & Wang, 2021; Farooq & Wicaksono, 2021). On the other hand, Farooq and Wicaksono (2021) found that high consumer skepticism results in a preference for silent green companies – those that employ greenhushing strategies.

Table 6

Consumer Responses

Message Appeal Strategy	Consumer Response	Authors
Greenhushing	Increases consumer trust compared to greenwashing messages.	Christis & Wang (2021); Dewandini et al. (2022)
Greenwashing	Increases consumer skepticism, leading to lower purchase intention.	Farooq & Wicaksono (2021); De Jong et al. (2018)
Vocal Green Firms	High trust and purchase intention compared to greenwashing messages.	De Jong et al. (2018)

4.2.3 Motives for employing greenhushing

The under-communication of sustainability efforts has various types and degrees (Falchi et al., 2022), as well as motivations and consequences for not publicizing it to stakeholders. According to Font, Elgammal, and Lamond (2017), businesses report that they implement just 30% of all sustainability practices. As an ethical process of showing transparency or as a risk

of provoking negative feedback from stakeholders, greenhushing brings consequences to firms, and it is crucial to understand why companies do not publicize their “greenness.”

Some authors declare the greenhushing strategy as problematic as greenwashing (Ettinger et al., 2021); there are the ones that see it as a stage of passage where a firm is still developing its communication about sustainability commitment (Baldassarre & Campo, 2016). Greenhushing and greenwashing represent inconsistent situations – respectively, high commitment and low communication *versus* low commitment and high communication (Ginder et al., 2021). However, greenhushing is generally more morally acceptable than greenwashing (Font et al., 2017). Three main factors suggest companies’ preference for applying greenhushing tactics (Table 7).

Table 7

Greenhushing Motivation

Motivation	Description	Authors
Fear of Baseless Accusations	Companies avoid disclosing sustainable practices to prevent being accused of greenwashing.	Ettinger et al. (2021); Falchi et al. (2022); Thakur, Singla, and Singla (2023)
Failures in the Communication Plan	Failures in communication strategy that prevent the effective dissemination of sustainable efforts.	Kutzschbach et al. (2021)
Sustainability as an Intrinsic Value	Companies view sustainability as a core value rather than something to be used for publicity.	Falchi et al. (2022)

The fear of baseless accusations regarding potential allegations of greenwashing drives the first one (Ettinger et al., 2021; Falchi et al., 2022; Farooq & Wicaksono, 2021). With the rise of green activists and external pressure on companies to align with greener and environmentally conscious models, there have been cases where firms manipulate their results and communicate a situation that does not align with actual performance. Consequently, to prevent negative consequences regarding public perceptions, some organizations keep their sustainability efforts private, thereby avoiding the risk of exposure or being labeled as deceptive. Along with this perception, some firms may believe that highlighting sustainable initiatives does not add any substantial advantage to consumers’ actions since they might assume it is untrustworthy, leading companies to question whether the benefits of publicizing sustainability efforts outweigh the risks of losing consumer trust (Font et al., 2017).

Additionally, studies suggest that certain factors discourage companies from communicating effectively. These include failures in the communication plan (Kutzschbach et

al., 2021) and the intention to avoid adverse effects on consumers, such as guilt, disappointment, embarrassment, negative experiences, and negative misconceptions – such as low quality and high price (Acuti et al., 2022; Falchi et al., 2022; Font et al., 2017). Also, some companies do not use sustainability as a selling argument because they consider it a core value, not something to be used for publicity (Falchi et al., 2022).

Thakur, Singla, and Singla (2023) identified that perceived risk (commonly related to sustainability features), consumer skepticism, the fear of being confused with greenwashing, and the altruism intrinsic to company values are relevant factors for applying greenhushing. In addition, the absence of sustainability certifications induces companies to refrain from green communication.

Finding an effective way to communicate about sustainability efforts can be challenging. Due to unclear or unengaging communication, businesses may face hurdles in getting their message across. If not well handled, these communication issues could downplay the significance of their efforts and fail to create a meaningful impact. This underlines the importance of businesses investing in strategic communication planning, ensuring their sustainability efforts are communicated clearly and effectively.

5 Discussion and research agenda

This study highlighted the paths researchers focus on regarding the non-communication or under-communication of companies' sustainability initiatives. Although it may seem counterintuitive not to communicate actions that are positively effective for the environment and society, the literature has explored the reasons behind this decision taken by companies. Given the role that greenhushing has been gaining in sustainability communication, this has been approached as a phenomenon, a strategy, and a message style.

Following the logic of the models presented by Baldassarre and Campo (2016), Delmas and Burbano (2011), and Ginder, Kwon, and Byun (2021), greenhushing is commonly seen as a situation opposite to greenwashing. Nevertheless, the studies show that both situations present inconsistent messages in the face of the companies' sustainable activities (or not, in the case of greenwashing). It is interesting to note that one of the reasons for companies to apply greenhushing is the fear of being confused with companies applying greenwashing (Ettinger et al., 2021; Falchi et al., 2022; Thakur et al., 2023). The inconsistency between “what it is” and “what it appears to be” affects both strategies.

Regarding the reasons for non-communication, studies have shown that ideas related to sustainability can foster negative feelings in consumers, such as guilt for not acting sustainably during their holidays, disappointment that their actions do not have a significant environmental impact, and preconceptions about expensive and poor-quality of sustainability products (Acuti et al., 2022). By avoiding communication, companies believe that they have overcome this communication gap.

In turn, not communicating is seen more favorably than communicating in a wrong or misleading way. In this case, situations such as the communication of the actual actions that the company carries out (*vocal green firms*) or the non-communication of these actions (*greenhushing*) are better than a deceptive communication strategy (*greenwashing*) (Christis & Wang, 2021; De Jong et al., 2018). Table 8 summarizes these ideas.

Table 8

Conceptual Summary

Aspects	Greenwashing	Greenhushing
Definition	Over-promotion of sustainability communication without matching it with real actions.	Avoidance of publicizing sustainability initiatives.
Other Nomenclatures	Vocal Brown Firms; Emphatic.	Silent Green Firms; Discreet.
Antecedents	Increasing market differentiation without adopting genuine sustainability practices.	Avoid accusations of greenwashing or negative exposure. Consider sustainability as an intrinsic value.
Consumer Perception	High distrust, perception of deception.	Increased trust but limited awareness of sustainability practices.
Consequences	Consumer skepticism, loss of trust and potential boycott when discovered, however can get an initial attraction of environmentally conscious consumers, increasing brand visibility.	Lack of recognition for sustainable actions, less marketing impact with a possibility of building trust among consumers who prefer transparency and genuine commitment.
Sustainability Performance	Low (↓).	High (↑).
Sustainability Communication	High (↑).	Low (↓).

The present study sheds light on possible future research paths and highlights gaps in how greenhushing is being studied. The idea of greenhushing is not just non-communication but the non-communication of actions effectively being developed by companies (De Jong et al., 2018). In this way, scenarios involving greenhushing should include this idea to differentiate

it from a situation where the company does not act in favor of sustainability. Although communication is the link for transmitting information between companies and consumers, studies could develop scenarios where greenhushing and silent brown firms are evaluated more precisely.

Future studies must investigate *why*, *when*, and *how* companies should or should not publicize their sustainability initiatives. This means that researchers must identify the optimal timing during their sustainability process to communicate, avoiding being labeled as a greenwashing company. In essence, upcoming studies need to map out the communication channels most likely to reach consumers with sustainable communications, considering the actual efforts the company is developing and potential gaps in this process. Further, it is vital to understand how consumers with sustainable habits perceive these communication decisions from companies. Considering that consumers aim to share common values with the company, future studies should explore the effects of greenhushing on the purchase decision of sustainability consumers, who tend to seek environmentally engaged companies.

The tourism sector stands out on the subject, considering the complexity of engaging consumers in moments of vacation and leisure where sustainability may seem like an obligation that needs to be fulfilled (Ettinger et al., 2021; Kuokkanen & Sun, 2020). Despite this, studies need to go further and investigate how and where communication should be positioned to generate awareness and not guilt or shame. Other sectors of the economy can benefit from these findings, considering that many segments face challenges in promoting their sustainability initiatives. For instance, the fashion and automotive industries are naturally seen as “non-sustainable,” an idea that does not nullify their efforts in favor of the environment and society. Future studies must investigate the best communication path to engage green consumers.

6 Conclusions

Our systematic literature review sheds light on some concepts related to sustainability communication, specifically under-communication. After analyzing 21 documents about greenhushing, we observed several insights. The research on terminologies related to greenhushing is significantly less extensive than greenwashing, as these terms are still not widely used. However, with the notable increase of studies on the subject since 2016, greenhushing is beginning to gain traction and robustness within the sustainable communication literature. Evidently, companies engaged in sustainability practices fully embrace its

significance. Adopting a silent approach indicates that the company’s actions lean towards under-communication, which brings several potential negative implications.

First, there is a possibility of losing opportunities, such as potential sales and attracting new investors. Since the information on sustainability efforts is unavailable, stakeholders would not be encouraged to engage in a relationship with the company (Baldassarre & Campo, 2016). Second, regarding management practices, such as enhancing stakeholder engagement (Fritz & Silva, 2018), adopting an approach of under-communication as a practice could potentially negatively affect a company. Understanding how to approach communication on sustainability could reduce the possibility of raising negative perceptions of consumers regarding their skepticism of sustainable practices. Since practice is an embedded aspect within an organization, adopting this strategy can potentially disrupt engagement, especially among employees, as the organization needs to communicate its efforts and internally convey its genuine values. This misalignment can undermine these employees’ motivation and impact the company’s performance, disconnecting its actual practice from its attitudes.

Our study brings some limitations. The first issue is the number of articles included in the data analysis. The authors performed numerous search protocols to identify new documents, but new relevant papers were not found. This shows that the field is still developing, and many opportunities exist to explore the phenomenon. Another limitation refers to the quality filter of the articles. As the number of articles was reduced, no quality filter was performed. This decision covers the state-of-art but may not bring truthful results.

The choice to follow the PRISMA protocol is also a limitation of this study, as relying exclusively on PRISMA may constrain the scope and depth of the findings. While PRISMA is widely recognized for its systematic and transparent approach to literature reviews (Hiebl, 2023), other protocols might offer alternative frameworks that could lead to different insights or interpretations (e.g., QUOROM) (Hiebl, 2023; Pussegoda et al., 2017).

This study makes significant theoretical contributions to the literature since the body of knowledge on greenhushing is still being built. By highlighting the risks associated with under-communicating sustainable initiatives, the research underscores the limitations of such practices, particularly regarding their impact on awareness, stakeholder engagement, and the potential for collaborative actions.

This research builds upon previous studies and contributes to the knowledge of how communication strategies, or their absence, can influence perceptions and results in corporate sustainability. The results indicate that a well-defined and transparent communication strategy

is essential for practitioners; solely emphasizing environmental actions without effectively communicating them may not yield the desired outcomes. Neglecting to communicate may adversely affect stakeholder awareness, involvement, and cooperation, even if companies prioritize under-communication. Therefore, refraining from communication may not be the most effective approach.

Authors' contributions

Contributions	Dias, L. P. C.	Bagatini, F. Z.	Perin, M. G.
Contextualization	X	X	X
Methodology	X	X	X
Software	X	----	----
Validation	X	X	X
Formal analysis	X	X	----
Investigation	X	X	----
Resources	X	X	X
Data curation	X	X	----
Writing – Original Draft	X	X	----
Writing – Review and editing	X	X	X
Visualization	X	X	X
Supervision	----	----	X
Project administration	X	----	----
Funding acquisition	----	----	X

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Table 9 A

Appendix A – database – main information

Nº	Title	Authors	Journal	Year	Empirical vs. theoretical	Qualitative vs. Quantitative	Paradigms
1	Talking the Walk: Conceptualizing Antecedents and Consequences of Greenhushing	Thakur et al.	Handbook of Evidence Based Management Practices in Business (Chapter)	2023	Theoretical	NA	Positivism
2	The Drivers of Greenwashing	Delmas & Burbano	California Management Review	2011	Theoretical	NA	Positivism
3	Making Green Stuff? Effects of Corporate Greenwashing on Consumers	De Jong et al.	Journal of Business and Technical Communication	2018	Empirical	Quantitative	Positivism
4	Greenhushing: the deliberate under communicating of sustainability practices by tourism businesses	Font et al.	Journal of Sustainable Tourism	2017	Empirical	Mixed-methods	Interpretativism
5	Sustainability as a marketing tool: To be or to appear to be?	Baldassarre & Campos	Business Horizons	2016	Theoretical	NA	Positivism
6	Effects of Internal–External Congruence-Based CSR Positioning: An Attribution Theory Approach	Ginder et al.	Journal of Business Ethics	2021	Empirical	Quantitative	Positivism
7	The Desirability of CSR Communication versus Greenhushing in the Hospitality Industry: The Customers’ Perspective	Ettinger et al.	Journal of Travel Research	2020	Empirical	Mixed-methods	Positivism
8	Business models among SMTEs: identifying attitudes to environmental costs and their implications for sustainable tourism	Coles et al.	Journal of Sustainable Tourism	2017	Empirical	Mixed-methods	Positivism
9	Advancing on the analysis of causes and consequences of green skepticism	Farooq & Wicaksono	Journal of Cleaner Production	2021	Empirical	Quantitative	Positivism
10	When sustainability backfires: A review on the unintended negative side-effects of product and service sustainability on consumer behavior	Acuti et al.	Psychology and marketing	2022	Theoretical	Systematic Review	Positivism
11	Communicating environmental management certification: Signaling without signals?	Heras-Saizarbitoria et al.	Business Strategy and the Environmental	2019	Empirical	Qualitative	Positivism

Nº	Title	Authors	Journal	Year	Empirical vs. theoretical	Qualitative vs. Quantitative	Paradigms
12	The Role of Top Managers in Implementing Corporate Sustainability—A Systematic Literature Review on Small and Medium-Sized Enterprises	Kutzschbach et al.	Administrative Sciences	2021	Theoretical	Systematic Review	Positivism
13	Communicating Environmental CSR towards Consumers: The Impact of Message Content, Message Style and Praise Tactics	Christis & Wang	Sustainability	2021	Empirical	Quantitative	Positivism
14	Why companies might under-communicate their efforts for sustainable development and what can be done?	Falchi et al.	Business Strategy and the Environmental	2021	Theoretical	NA	Positivism
15	Social desirability and cynicism biases in CSR surveys: an empirical study of hotels	Kuokkanen & Sun	Journal of Hospitality and Tourism Insights	2020	Empirical	Quantitative	Positivism
16	Green Management Tools as a Way to Sustainable Behaviour in the Hotel Industry: Case Study from Czechia	Scholz et al.	Sustainability	2020	Empirical	Quantitative	Positivism
17	What if the local community is already well-off enough? Stakeholders’ conflicts over sustainable tourism development in remote communities	Elgammal	Journal of Place Management and Development	2022	Empirical	Qualitative	Interpretativism
18	CSR communication and media channel choice in the hospitality and tourism industry	Pérez & Mar	Tourism Management Perspectives	2023	Empirical	Quantitative	Positivism
19	Green to Gold: Beneficial Impacts of Sustainability Certification and Practice on Tour Enterprise Performance	Hellmeister & Richins	Sustainability	2019	Empirical	Quantitative	Positivism
20	Sustainability performance and sustainability reporting in SMEs: a love affair or a fight?	Galli et al.	Journal of Management & Organization	2023	Empirical	Qualitative	Interpretativism
21	Greenwashing or Greenhushing?: A Quasi-Experiment to Correlate Green Behaviour and Tourist’s Level of Trust Toward Communication Strategies in Volunteer Tourism’s Website	Swestiana et al.	Jurnal Kepariwisata: Destinasi, Hospitalitas dan Perjalanan	2022	Empirical	Quantitative	Positivism