

# THE (UNDER) COMMUNICATION OF SUSTAINABILITY IN DIGITAL ENVIRONMENTS: AN EMPIRICAL INVESTIGATION

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## ***Abstract***

The paper aims to investigate the use of digital marketing tools to communicate sustainability and the factors that determine companies' under-communication of sustainability (the green blushing phenomenon) in digital environments. Through a qualitative methodology based on in-depth interviews, the paper identifies six factors responsible for green blushing, traced back to three main discussion areas.

**Keywords:** *communication, sustainability, green blushing, greenhushing, digital tools*

## **1. INTRODUCTION AND AIM OF THE PAPER**

Nowadays, companies are expected to adopt sustainable practices and be transparent about their efforts (Lee *et al.*, 2024); this includes communicating their actions and results related to sustainability's economic, social, and environmental sides. The concept of "sustainability communication" can be defined as "*the set of strategies and subsequent practices that have a relevant role in disseminating information about an organization's environmental and social behaviours to influence, support and enhance the company's corporate image in the eyes of its stakeholders and final customers and to indirectly promote its products*" (Da Giau *et al.*, 2016, p. 77). Beyond traditional communication tools, sustainability communication increasingly leverages digital marketing tools, considering online platforms like corporate websites and social media (Reilly and Hynan, 2014). However, while digital communication tools allow reaching a vast audience, they expose companies extensively to criticism and accusations. In this scenario, green blushing, also termed greenhushing, emerges. Specifically, green blushing is a practice that happens when companies minimize or omit their authentic sustainability efforts, leading to "silent green firms" (Font *et al.*, 2017). These companies actively work towards sustainability goals but choose not to publicize their actions, losing out on the potential advantages of sustainability communication (Cheng *et al.*, 2024). The literature on green blushing is still in its infancy, and more research is needed on why firms under-communicate their sustainability initiatives and the implications of green blushing (Acuti *et al.*, 2022). Empirical studies are particularly important (Cheng *et al.*, 2024). Indeed, as much of the research is theoretical, adding empirical data could significantly contribute to expanding our understanding of this

phenomenon. Hence, the paper aims to investigate companies' use of digital marketing tools (e.g., social media, websites, emails, and newsletters) for sustainability communication and the factors that determine green blushing in digital environments.

## **2. THEORETICAL BACKGROUND**

Communicating sustainability benefits companies as, by demonstrating their commitment, they can attract conscientious consumers, investors, and partners. Precisely, sustainability communication involves both the content, which can range from mandatory to voluntary disclosures and the means of communication. The choice of communication tools is paramount. Along with traditional and offline tools (e.g., sustainability reports, green advertising on TV or magazines, events, and public relations), digital marketing tools play a key role in online sustainability communication (Amran *et al.*, 2015). Digital tools include companies' websites, content platforms, emails, apps, and social media. In particular, social media has become a fundamental way for organizations seeking to engage with a broader audience. Sustainability commitment and sustainability communication should be ideally aligned in companies; however, the phenomenon of green blushing proves that this is often not the case. Baldassarre and Campo (2016) present the so-called "translucent companies", i.e., those companies that carry out numerous sustainable initiatives but fail to communicate them adequately. Some reasons could be identified for the under-communication of sustainability. For instance, silent companies may not fully understand the significance of green reporting or believe their environmental achievements are unimportant enough to share. At the same time, sustainability accomplishments might be overlooked due to being handled by departments unfamiliar with communication or the high communication costs. Finally, the lack of communication can be unintentional, particularly when sustainability efforts are internally motivated. Green blushing can create a "discretion trap"; it protects companies from potential negative consequences and prevents them and society from benefiting from sustainability-oriented reporting (Falchi *et al.*, 2022). The literature on green blushing is not yet fully developed, and there is much room for advancement in this increasingly widespread phenomenon.

## **3. RESEARCH METHODOLOGY**

Given the exploratory nature of the research, we adopted a qualitative methodology approach. We counted on in-depth interviews as primary data sources (Eisenhardt and Graebner, 2007) and secondary documents. Specifically, we interviewed company representatives following a purposive sampling technique to include subjects with particular knowledge. However, as a first step, we found the firms: we selected organizations actively involved in sustainability initiatives across environmental, social, and economic dimensions and verified their online presence, mainly focusing on corporate websites and social media. As a second step, company management purposefully suggested company representatives for their expertise in sustainability, marketing, or communication. In the end, from February to July 2024, we conducted semi-structured, face-to-face, and in-depth interviews with 25 company representatives of 20 companies, which are all Italian but vary in size, age, and sector. For the

interviews, we relied on an ad hoc protocol of analysis. Concerning the data analysis phase, our study employed an abductive approach, systematically integrating extant theory and empirical fieldwork (Dubois and Gadde, 2002).

#### 4. FINDINGS

The empirical research has identified six key factors determining the firms' tendency towards green blushing when using digital communication tools. *Lack of a well-structured sustainability communication plan*: the lack of a structured program for sustainability content leads firms to occasional and sporadic communication; furthermore, when a solid communication plan does not support the sustainability strategy, the company is unsure of what to communicate and how to communicate it. *Criticalities in the company's skills and internal coordination*: based on our research, there is a companies' lack of dedicated roles (e.g., a sustainability manager or a communications specialist); in this vein, even if a company has specialized figures, there is often a lack of dialogue between the two roles. *Challenges in finding sustainability KPIs*: some difficulties emerge in identifying objective and consistent indicators for communicating sustainability projects; when suitable KPIs are available, the difficulty lies in making them understandable to a non-expert audience, like that represented by social media users. *Issues related to the target audience*: companies are struggling to engage the broader social media audience, as the social media user is characterized by a low attention span and carries out a superficial reading of content; also, for firms operating on a global scale, it is not easy to transfer information in the same way to all the countries reached. *Communication difficulties about joint sustainability initiatives*: digital communication often faces challenges due to difficulties in engaging with multiple players and collaborative sustainability projects are frequently hushed up for a number of reasons. *Fear of greenwashing accusations*: according to our findings, since firms have the fear of making a mistake and being falsely accused of greenwashing, they practice self-censorship for fear of irreparably damaging their image; thus, companies are prudent and voluntarily silent on sustainability topics, showing an aversion to risk.

#### 5. CONCLUSIONS AND FINAL REMARKS

Our findings show six key factors that collectively explain the challenges in the digital communication of sustainability, contributing to green blushing. These six factors conduct the discussion of three main areas: i) *The organizational dimension of the communication process*; our analysis emphasizes the need for intra-organizational and inter-organizational aspects, such as specialized sustainability units and coordination with sustainability and digital marketing experts; ii) *The level of control over that process*; sustainability involves multiple actors, but the level of control a firm can exercise is limited, thus hindering sustainability communication in digital environments; iii) *The matching between digital tools and sustainability initiatives*; it is challenging to communicate complex sustainability arguments through digital marketing tools, especially on social media, which prioritizes brevity and quick engagement. Also, websites or emails may attract attention only from experts.

This paper is one of the first to explore the understudied phenomenon of green blushing, adopting an empirical perspective and focusing on digital communication tools. It aligns with the recent debate about the emerging paradoxes of sustainability (Akrouit and Guercini, 2022). Specifically, this research highlights the challenges, rather than the opportunities, that digital tools pose in communicating sustainable initiatives. Additionally, it has considerable managerial implications. The cross-cutting nature of sustainability at the organizational level requires collaboration between content experts and communication professionals. Furthermore, companies should pay close attention to the evolution of digital tools and consider current advancements in artificial intelligence. Finally, as green blushing limits companies' reach and hinders sustainability awareness, policymakers should encourage stakeholder collaboration and promote digital sustainability communication through appropriate regulation. While the study offers a valuable contribution, it also has limitations. Future research should investigate whether green blushing happens only in digital environments by comparing digital and traditional communication tools and exploring possible ways to mitigate it.

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