

SECRET SUSTAINABILITY

**A CASE STUDY OF WHY A COMPANY MIGHT GO SILENT
WITH ITS GREEN ACHIEVEMENTS**

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Secret sustainability: A case study of why a company might go silent with its green achievements

Abstract:

Greenhushing is acknowledged as a growing concerning behavior referring to when companies deliberately avoid communicating their green achievements. Thus, while companies do substantial work within sustainability, these efforts are strategically or involuntarily not communicated, but why? The research field on greenhushing remains nascent, and scholars have inadequately explained why greenhushing occurs, particularly has previous literature overlooked the strategic perspective and company-specific circumstances. Hence, this study aims to investigate and identify the drivers for greenhushing and the company-specific circumstances conducive to greenhushing, which can give reason for why some companies or situations are more or less prone to adopt the behavior. Thus, the theoretical lenses of strategic brand positioning and institutional theory have been applied to advance the explanations for why greenhushing occurs and how it can be better understood by a brand's positioning strategy and company's institutional environment. Through a qualitative case study with semi-structured interviews at a FMCG company, it has been possible to revisit and improve previous findings on greenhushing but also expand and deepen the research by capturing several new explanations for why greenhushing occurs. The findings propose six drivers for greenhushing; (1) Fear of being accused of hypocrisy or greenwashing, (2) Low level of importance, (3) Level of internal motivation, (4) Avoid detrimental inferences, (5) Low level of brand fit and (6) High level of sustainability complexity. Further, the circumstances conducive to greenhushing have been established by the following three parts: external circumstances (regulators, media, trends, industry, competitors, consumers, market gatekeepers and technical development), organizational circumstances (size, structure, processes, and culture) and strategic brand positioning circumstances (portfolio, target consumer, competitive advantage, and message hierarchy). The study has developed a theoretical framework that later emerged into an extended framework which can be used as a basis for other greenhushing studies in the future.

Keywords: Greenhushing, Green Blushing, Green Communication, Green Marketing, Corporate Social Responsibility

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Definition of Terms

Word	Definition
Greenhushing	The deliberate withholding, from customers and stakeholders, of information about the sustainability practices that they employ (Font et al., 2017, p.1).
Greenwashing	Greenwashing is a combination of two firm behaviors: poor environmental performance and positive communication about environmental performance (Delmas & Burbano, 2011). A well-known definition of greenwashing is <i>“The act of misleading consumers regarding the environmental practices of a company or the environmental benefits of a product or service”</i> (TerraChoice, 2009, p. 1).
Green communication	Environmental sustainability marketing communication. Green communication, sustainability communication and environmental communication are used interchangeably in this thesis.
Green achievements	Environmental sustainability achievements. Green achievements, green innovations, green efforts, sustainability achievements and other related expressions such as greenness or sustainability are used interchangeably in this thesis.
Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR)	CSR is a broad concept that covers a range of environmental, social, and ethical responsibilities and there have been numerous definitions in the literature over the years. Carroll (1999, p. 286) suggests that social responsibility covers <i>“the conduct of a business so that it is economically profitable, law-abiding, ethical and socially supportive”</i> .
Fast Moving Consumer Goods (FMCG)	FMCG, also known as consumer-packaged goods (CPG), are products that are high in turnover and sold at a relatively low cost at retailers (Investopedia, 2021).
Post-recycled plastic (PCR)	Post-consumer recycled plastic, often referred to as PCR, is plastic made from items consumers recycle daily, such as plastic bottles. New PCR plastic can then be used for packaging (ePac Flexible Packaging, 2022).

1. Introduction

1.1 Background

The positive relationship between corporate social responsibility (CSR) and increased company benefits, such as employee commitment, customer loyalty, improved reputation and business performance (Du et al., 2007; Knox & Maklan, 2004; Maignan et al., 1999), has led companies to increasingly communicate the greenness of products and practices to reap the benefits of being perceived as a green business (Ambec & Lanoie, 2008; Belz & Peattie, 2012; Delmas & Burbano, 2011). While many firms do this based on good ethics, it has also led some companies to over-communicate their green achievements and engage in greenwashing behavior to reap the benefits without doing the hard work to substantiate the claims (Delmas & Burbano, 2011; Lyon & Montgomery, 2015). On the contrary, other companies choose to deliberately under-communicate their green achievements, a behavior referred to as greenhushing (Font et al., 2017). Whereas most people are familiar with the concern of greenwashing, greenhushing is acknowledged as a growing concerning behavior given the significant benefits associated with green communication that companies renounce and the potential negative effect greenhushing can have on environmental development (Burrows, 2020; Falchi et al., 2022; Schoeneborn, 2017).

Hence, even though it may sound counterproductive to invest in sustainability without communicating the achievements, this is an occurring strategy at many companies. Notable examples include Walmart being one of the biggest retailers, which has accomplished impressive sustainability improvements but deliberately kept it internally (Lindsay, 2016); a well-known car manufacturer that spent 15 years of efforts to reduce energy in the car production by 75%, still refused to be mentioned by name and kept the innovation secret from consumers (Coburn, 2019); several winemakers that invested heavily in switching to producing organic wine without signaling it to consumers (Coburn, 2019; Delmas & Grant, 2014); and many hotel managers are found to de-emphasizing their green achievements, where it has gotten so far in the hospitality industry that one even claimed that greenhushing might be taking over from greenwashing (Coles et al., 2017; Font et al., 2017; Heras-Saizarbitoria et al., 2020; Simpson, 2016).

Most researchers and professional experts explain the uprise of greenhushing due to the high prevalence of greenwashing behavior, which has led to increased green skepticism and scrutiny in society. Following this, companies increasingly fear being accused of greenwashing or hypocrisy despite good intentions (Burrows, 2020; Carlos & Lewis, 2018; Coburn, 2019; Falchi et al., 2022; Ginder et al., 2019; Lindsay, 2016; Lyon & Maxwell, 2011; Seele & Gatti, 2017; Vallaster et al., 2012). Other explanations have been recognized, although these have only to a limited extent been examined in greenhushing

literature (Falchi et al., 2022; Font et al., 2017). For instance, from a strategy perspective, greenhushing is argued to be connected to positioning strategies, given that a CSR position must be established prior to disseminating CSR communication (Ginder et al., 2019; Polonsky & Jevons, 2009; Vallaster et al., 2012). Thus, one's current position will determine if an environmental CSR position is feasible or desirable. Nevertheless, literature remains insufficient in capturing the whole picture of why green achievements would be deliberately withheld and have inadequately reflected how a company's internal and external circumstances conducive to greenhushing behavior. Therefore, it is of great interest to delve deeper into why greenhushing is a prevalent behavior.

1.2 Problem Discussion

Greenhushing does not only deprive a company of the benefits associated with green communication (Burrows, 2020; Falchi et al., 2022), the behavior can also push other companies to follow a similar path where they remain silent about green achievements (DiMaggio & Powell, 1983). Thus, greenhushing can hinder the extrinsic motives for environmental CSR and the diffusion of socially desirable activities, thus slowing down the environmental movement (Carlos & Lewis, 2018; Falchi et al., 2022; Ginder et al., 2019). Hence, the potential societal effect of greenhushing illustrates a real-world problem, justifying the importance of strengthening the research (Gustafsson & Hagström, 2017). Further, the research field on greenhushing remains nascent, thus researchers and practitioners emphasize the need for expanding the literature (Carlos & Lewis, 2018; Falchi et al., 2022; Schoeneborn, 2017). Falchi et al. (2022) were the first who enriched the greenhushing field with a literature review and established four drivers for greenhushing. While this framework offers a solid starting point, it has not sufficiently reflected the close overlap between a brand's positioning and greenhushing behavior (Ginder et al., 2019; Polonsky & Jevons, 2009; Vallaster et al., 2012). Thus, this argues for the need to revise what has been identified in a new way and by incorporating strategic brand positioning as a theoretical lens as it can contribute to new insights (MacInnis, 2011). Also, examining the drivers in a real-life setting can improve existing findings and uncover new drivers for greenhushing under other circumstances (Christensen et al., 2002).

Beyond the limited research on drivers for greenhushing, Falchi et al. (2022) and Kim and Lyon (2015) argue for the need of identifying and characterizing the circumstances conducive to greenhushing. This given that some green efforts and subsequent communications are not equal for all organizations and situations. Hence, different companies will likely be more or less prone to adopt greenhushing behavior. Circumstances in this instance are the conditions that a company is surrounded by and bound to, which can explain the background leading to greenhushing behavior and one's proneness to it. Related to this have research found that CSR-related communication depends on company-specific circumstances and how companies position their brands relative to CSR, where greenhushing can be a potential outcome (Ginder et al., 2019;

Polonsky & Jevons, 2009; Vallaster et al., 2012). However, positioning as a circumstance has not been adequately reflected in the greenhushing research. Thus, there is value in examining greenhushing through the theoretical lens of strategic brand positioning since it can bring additional meaning and significance to the circumstances conducive to greenhushing (Christensen et al., 2002).

Further, Ginder et al. (2021) predict that a company's level of perceived CSR expertise and credibility by consumers are circumstances likely to affect the choice of green communication. Likewise, Polonsky and Jevons (2009) argued for more qualitative research to understand how companies strategically use CSR in their brand communication based on trade-offs with stakeholder interests and influence. Combined, this indicates that a company's decision-making regarding green communication is affected by its external environment. Hence, from a broader standpoint, given that companies rely on external approval to obtain legitimacy and survive in the marketplace, a company's institutional environment will pressure the adoption of certain actions and behaviors (DiMaggio & Powell, 1983). Therefore, the well-established discipline of institutional theory can enable a deeper understanding of companies' decision making and thus better explain company-specific circumstances conducive to greenhushing. Moreover, since greenhushing is a prevalent behavior despite depriving a company of the benefits of green reporting (Falchi et al., 2022), institutional theory can explain why companies sometimes adopt irrational behavior (Meyer & Rowan, 1977). Further, by conducting an in-depth single-case study, one can effectively link the organizational level circumstances and institutional theory, which is called for by Hoffman (2001). Conclusively, the lens of institutional theory can generate more meaning and implications about the circumstances conducive to greenhushing (Christensen et al., 2002).

1.3 Purpose and Research Questions

The purpose of this thesis is to contribute to the greenhushing literature by deepening the understanding of *why* companies conduct greenhushing behavior. To fulfill this purpose, the following two research questions will be addressed:

1. *What are the drivers for greenhushing behavior?*
2. *What are the circumstances conducive to greenhushing, and how do these affect a company's proneness to conduct greenhushing behavior?*

The first question aims to expand and improve the current findings of the drivers for greenhushing. Further, the second question intends to identify and characterize the circumstances conducive to greenhushing. Thus, by establishing circumstances, one can better explain the drivers leading to greenhushing as these are contingent on company-specific circumstances, which generates a more nuanced understanding of *why* greenhushing occurs.

1.4 Delimitation

The thesis will study greenhushing through a case study on a multinational FMCG company, but the interviews will be delimited only to the Nordic region. Moreover, although the case company communicates both on a corporate and brand level, this thesis will only study brand level communication to consumers.

1.5 Expected Contribution

This thesis contributes to theory as well as practice. Firstly, it will make a theoretical contribution by expanding and improving established drivers for greenhushing (Falchi et al., 2022) by practically examining it under new circumstances and by adding the theoretical lense of strategic brand positioning can anomalies be discovered (Christensen et al., 2002). In addition, by investigating company-specific internal and external circumstances conducive to greenhushing through the lenses of strategic brand positioning and institutional theory, this thesis can capture a broader and more nuanced explanation for greenhushing behavior and fill a critical research gap. Combined, by understanding the drivers and circumstances, the authors expect to contribute a useful framework for future greenhushing studies. Secondly, in a practical manner, companies are expected to conduct greenhushing to different extent depending on their circumstances and external pressure. Thus, as this can impact how the competitive field and business environment unfold, it is essential for managers to understand. Likewise, the importance of highlighting greenhushing companies can reduce the asymmetry between consumers' views on companies' green actions.

2. Literature Review

The literature presented in this section provides an understanding and overview of the previous research on greenhushing (2.1). The two selected theoretical perspectives are presented (2.2). Lastly, a synthesis of the literature review and the identified research gap (2.3), followed by the theoretical framework that will guide the analysis (2.4).

2.1 Greenhushing

The growing demand and concern for sustainable development drives companies to see the value and need for developing green marketing strategies (Kinoti, 2011). Thus, the development of green products and the evolution of green marketing have rapidly evolved over the last two decades (Delmas & Burbano, 2011). Companies have increasingly been communicating about sustainability to reap the benefits of being perceived as a green business, however it has led to varying strategies for green communication (see Figure 1, Delmas & Burbano, 2011). While the Greenwashing (I) phenomenon is widely known and has been well-discussed by scholars (Delmas & Burbano, 2011; Lyon & Montgomery, 2015), Silent Green Firms (II) has been acknowledged as a growing and concerning behavior, but remains nascent in academia (Falchi et al., 2022). The latter is also known as greenhushing (Font et al., 2017). As figure 1 illustrates, greenhushing and greenwashing are converse behaviors but simultaneously similar in that despite the approach, the environmental performance is separate from the communication (Font et al., 2017; Schoeneborn et al., 2020).

Communication about Environmental Performance	Positive Communication	I Greenwashing Firms	II Vocal Green Firms
	No Communication	III Silent Brown Firms	IV Silent Green Firms
		Bad	Good
		Environmental Performance	

Figure 1 - Typology of Firms based on Environmental Performance and Communication (Delmas & Burbano, 2011)

The behavior of greenhushing is defined by Font et al. (2017, p.1) as “*the deliberate withholding, from customers and stakeholders, of information about the sustainability practices that they employ*”. Given that greenhushing is a relatively new research field, the concept has been referred to in different ways in literature. Namely as green blushing (Falchi et al., 2022), silent green firms (Delmas & Burbano, 2011), strategic silence (Carlos & Lewis, 2018), discreet CSR position (Ginder et al., 2019), quietly conscientious

(Vallaster et al., 2012), and greenhushing (Coles et al., 2017; Ettinger et al., 2021; Font et al., 2017; Heras-Saizarbitoria et al., 2020). In this study, the latter will be used for consistency. Nevertheless, these concepts relate to the same phenomenon but have been researched from different angles, theoretical lenses, and within different industries. In most cases, greenhushing has been acknowledged in greenwashing studies or investigated relative to the greenwashing phenomenon (Delmas & Burbano, 2011; Ginder et al., 2019; Kim & Lyon, 2015; Lyon & Maxwell, 2011; Vallaster et al., 2012). Hence, the most salient explanation for the rise of greenhushing originates in the diffusion of greenwashing behavior (Falchi et al., 2022). Moreover, the majority of greenhushing research has examined the hospitality industry, and Font et al. (2017) were one of the first who academically coined the term greenhushing (Coles et al., 2017; Ettinger et al., 2021; Font et al., 2017; Heras-Saizarbitoria et al., 2020).

2.1.1 Drivers for Greenhushing

As greenhushing is a nascent research field, the drivers of greenhushing remain largely overlooked. Falchi et al. (2022) are one of the few researchers that has moved beyond the hospitality industry to study greenhushing with a more holistic view. Through a literature review and analytical reasoning, Falchi et al. (2022) aim to explain why companies deliberately conduct greenhushing and propose four underlying drivers. These drivers function as a starting point for the theoretical framework of this thesis. However, the authors of this thesis have strengthened the explanations for these drivers with supporting literature. Furthermore, additional findings by other researchers going beyond the literature review by Falchi et al. (2022) have also been integrated to give a more nuanced view. See figure 2 for an overview of the drivers for greenhushing built on the drivers by Falchi et al. (2022) (solid lines) and additional findings (dashed lines).

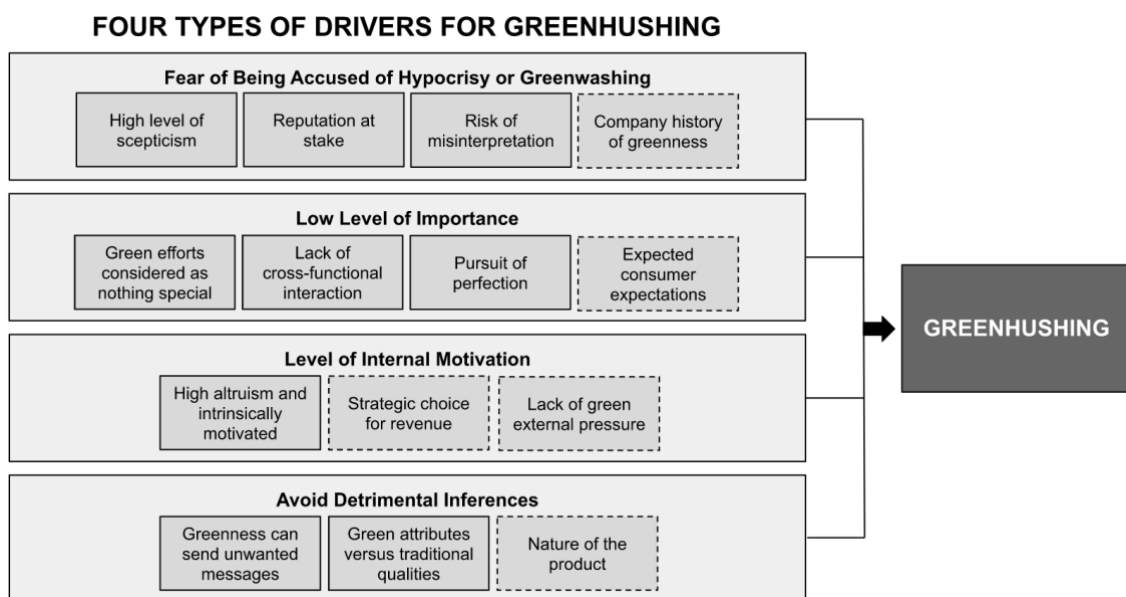


Figure 2 - Drivers for greenhushing, inspired by Falchi et al. (2022)

2.1.1.1 Fear of Being Accused of Hypocrisy or Greenwashing

The most prominent driver for greenhushing is found to be the fear of being accused of greenwashing or hypocrisy and targeted by NGOs or other stakeholders (Carlos & Lewis, 2018; Falchi et al., 2022; Ginder et al., 2019; Lyon & Maxwell, 2011; Vallaster et al., 2012). Given the high prevalence of greenwashing firms, there is a widespread feeling that companies communicate extravagant claims about their green efforts (Christensen et al., 2013; Heras-Saizarbitoria et al., 2020). Thus, greenwashing has resulted in a high level of green skepticism among consumers and with increased scrutiny from society, green communication can backfire if the public perceives it as greenwashing, self-promotion, or hypocrisy (Carlos & Lewis, 2018; Lyon & Montgomery, 2015). Hence, it is argued for an increased risk of being accused of greenwashing, even for companies that are not trying to mislead consumers, which can negatively affect a company's reputation and reduce one's legitimacy (Falchi et al., 2022; Lyon & Maxwell, 2011; Seele & Gatti, 2017). Thus, given the potentially damaging consequences and negative media coverage of being labeled a greenwasher, this driver is particularly applicable to companies that have much to lose in terms of reputation (Falchi et al., 2022; Lyon & Maxwell, 2011).

When communicating new green achievements, a company also challenges itself by creating a new green reference point for the consumers, which can negatively impact the perception of current products or areas that are not as environmentally friendly (Carlos & Lewis, 2018; Falchi et al., 2022). Therefore, if the loss is perceived as greater than the win, companies tend to prefer silence until the whole company reaches a sufficient level worth communicating. Similarly, greenhushing can occur until a product has accomplished an adequate level of sustainable ingredients to avoid suspicion among misinformed consumers (Falchi et al., 2022). For instance, if a product contains 40% organic ingredients, but the requirement to receive an eco-certification is only 20%, companies may continue to only communicate the certification due to the fear of being questioned about the remaining 60% of the ingredients (Falchi et al., 2022). Thus, since consumers tend to ignore the requirement levels and make incorrect inferences regarding eco-certifications, it becomes advantageous only to communicate recognized signals for green products (Brach et al., 2018; Bickart & Ruth, 2012; Dangelico & Vocalelli, 2017; Delmas & Gergaud, 2021; Heras-Saizarbitoria et al., 2020). Lastly, in complement to the findings by Falchi et al. (2022). A company with no history of green communication or considered having a green identity that suddenly becomes environmentally conscious can suffer from increased external suspicion, thus having a more challenging time convincing stakeholder (Balmer et al., 2013).

2.1.1.2 Low Level of Importance

Greenhushing can occur because companies fail to realize the importance of green achievements and the necessity to communicate them, which can be explained by the assumption that some green initiatives or achievements do not deserve to be communicated or will not generate a substantial benefit (Falchi et al., 2022). This

situation can appear if the sustainable achievement is performed in another department making the team responsible for marketing ignore it as it is not considered special enough or suitable for communication (Falchi et al., 2022). In this instance, big companies are particularly found to suffer from a lack of cooperation and interaction between internal disciplines, such as marketing and supply chain or weak integration of environmental sustainability professionals into the communication teams, which can inhibit the incorporation of sustainability (Petala et al., 2010). Furthermore, another reason for greenhushing is companies' aim of pursuing environmental perfection and thus not realizing it is a journey, making them wait until all the pieces are in place and the destination is reached (Falchi et al., 2022).

Going beyond the findings by Falchi et al. (2022), sustainability efforts can be regarded as of low importance by companies not believing their environmental initiatives constitute a point of difference or added value based on the expected key consumer expectation (Heras-Saizarbitoria et al., 2020; Vallaster et al., 2012). Instead, companies focus on other selling points expected to be demanded by the target group, such as reasonable prices. Similarly, green credentials were de-emphasized in the hospitality industry because managers did not believe their guests would be interested in hearing about how companies tackle sustainability during their holiday (Coles et al., 2017; Font et al., 2017).

2.1.1.3 Level of Internal Motivation

Depending on the motivation behind environmental sustainability achievements, companies can be inclined to conduct greenhushing. According to Bénabou and Tirole (2010), CSR related initiatives can be motivated by (1) pure altruism, (2) a win-win situation for profits and consumers, or (3) stakeholder forces. Falchi et al. (2022) argue that green communication can become secondary when a firm is highly internally motivated to do good and act sustainably. This may be explained by the instrumental purpose where non-disclosure can build an altruistic identity and desirable qualities (Falchi et al., 2022). Accordingly, green achievements are found to be more driven by intrinsic than extrinsic motives (Graafland et al., 2012). Therefore, green initiatives motivated by pure altruism can be kept inside the company since the effort is valued for themselves without the prospect of external gain.

While Falchi et al. (2022) only suggested that high altruism would lead to greenhushing, Ettinger et al. (2021) find that greenhushing is a business choice, like any marketing strategy whose *“primary goal is to sell more products without regard for the limits to growth theses while shrouding itself in the cloak of social responsibility”* (Kilbourne 2004, p. 201). Accordingly, in the hospitality industry, the commercial logic led to less emphasis on green credentials in the communication since it was expected to generate less revenue (Coles et al., 2017). Further, regarding the third motivation being the force from stakeholders, Alblas et al. (2014) found that the generally assumed sustainability

pressure is not entirely true. Thus, if the external pressure is lacking, it will lead to lower levels of sustainability motivation, making traditional marketing parameters prioritized over sustainability communication.

2.1.1.4 Avoid Detrimental Inferences

On one side are sustainable attributes and qualities found to be valuable and perceivable since there is a willingness to pay a premium price for green products (Dangelico & Vocalelli, 2017). However, there is also an intuitive misperception that sustainable products perform less than conventional equivalents and that greenness comes at the cost of other traditional qualities (Dangelico & Vocalelli, 2017; Delmas & Gergaud, 2021). Notably, this perception has challenged products with functional aspects, such as robustness, taste and durability (Mai et al., 2017; Newman et al., 2014). This bias thus makes communication around green characteristics less attractive as it may transmit an unwanted message that the greenness has been achieved at the cost of, e.g., efficacy, luxury or increased price (Brach et al., 2018; Chang, 2011; Grolleau et al., 2019; Wood et al., 2018). Therefore, avoiding these detrimental inferences and negatively risking the final purchase decision drives companies to conduct greenhushing (Falchi et al., 2022). However, Falchi et al. (2022) did not discuss to what extent detrimental inferences drive greenhushing, which Kim and Lyon (2015) argue depends on the nature of the product, hence related to the production process and consumer beliefs around a product.

2.1.2 Internal and External Circumstances for Greenhushing

Several researchers have argued that the choice to conduct greenhushing also depends on a company's internal and external circumstances (Falchi et al., 2022; Kim & Lyon, 2015; Ginder et al., 2021; Vallaster et al., 2012). Nevertheless, the circumstances conducive to greenhushing have not yet been established, thus the second research question of this thesis aims to address this research gap.

Research has suggested that some situations or companies are more or less prone to greenhushing depending on, e.g., company size, perceived synergies, profitability, regulatory context and type of operation, product or service (Falchi et al., 2022; Ginder et al., 2021; Kim & Lyon, 2015; Vallaster et al., 2012). Similarly, a company's level of perceived CSR expertise and credibility by consumers (Ginder et al., 2021) and level of stakeholder influence (Kim & Lyon, 2015; Polonsky & Jevons, 2009) are likely to affect the choice of green communication. Further, it is argued that in some circumstances, companies will make a strategic choice depending on the expected benefits and side effects of communicating their green achievements (Carlos & Lewis, 2018; Falchi et al., 2022; Vallaster et al., 2012). Thus, circumstances are conditions that a company is surrounded by and bound to, which can explain the background leading to greenhushing behavior and one's proneness to it.

2.2 Theoretical Perspectives to Greenhushing

Two complementary theoretical perspectives, namely strategic brand positioning and institutional theory, have been added to analyze greenhushing behavior. Since positioning is an act that comes before communication, it will naturally affect the strategic choice behind potential green communication. Thus, literature has acknowledged a close overlap between a company's position and identity and its choice of green communication, and if greenness is perceived to be of low fit, challenging to incorporate or constitute a risk, it can lead to greenhushing (Font et al., 2017; Ginder et al., 2019; Polonsky & Jevons, 2009; Vallaster et al., 2012). Furthermore, the authors' extended findings on the drivers for greenhushing (see dashed lines in Figure 2) indicate that greenhushing behavior is highly related to one's position. Hence, it suggests that applying strategic brand positioning as a theoretical lens for answering both research questions will enrich the analysis.

Secondly, institutionalism constitutes a powerful theory as it helps to understand the complex nature and intertwined relationships between a company and its surroundings. As a company's institutional environment pressures them to adopt certain behaviors (DiMaggio & Powell, 1983; Scott, 1995), the institutional theory can help explain why greenhushing behavior is conducted and what circumstances affect a company's proneness for greenhushing. Additionally, Hoffman (2001) means that decision-making is shaped by one's internal culture and external reality, thus arguing for connecting institutional theory to circumstances on an organizational level. Moreover, although greenhushing deprives a company of the benefits of green reporting, it is still a prevalent behavior (Falchi et al., 2022) and institutional theory can shed light on why companies may adopt such irrational behavior (Meyer & Rowan, 1977). Furthermore, the converse behavior of greenwashing has been explained as a reactive response due to the pressure coming from the external environment by drawing from institutional theory (Delmas & Burbano, 2011; Lyon & Montgomery, 2015). Thus, similarly, can institutional theory bring clarity to a study on greenhushing.

2.2.1 Strategic Brand Positioning

Strategic brand positioning is acknowledged as one of the most critical components in marketing management literature because it is argued to be the foundation of a brand and determines the direction of the overall marketing strategy and communication (Aaker & Shansby, 1982; Crawford, 1985; Kotler, 2003; Perreault & McCarthy, 1996). Hence, positioning tactics have been widely used across industries, defined by Kotler (2003) as *"An act of designing a company's offering and image so that they occupy a meaningful and distinct competitive position in the target market's minds"*. The key components of brand positioning are the frame of reference, points of parity (POP), and points of difference (POD). Thus, positioning is about defining what the brand is about, how it is unique and similar to competitors and making the consumers think of the brand in the desired way (Keller et al., 2002; Ries & Trout, 1969). Hence, a brand's position becomes

an important source of competitive advantage (Aaker & McLoughlin, 2010; Kotler, 2003) and affects profitability and long-term success (Crawford, 1985).

The frame of reference is determined by the identified target consumer and main competitors, and these will dictate a brand's context and what attributes should be closely related to the brand (Keller, 2013). A brand's POP is the shared associations with competitors within the same area that makes a brand credible, and POD is the differentiating part that can give competitive leverage (Keller, 2013). Thus, while a brand's unique selling points (POD) is an essential part of positioning (Kapferer, 2012; Bhat & Reddy, 1998), should a brand's POP not be overlooked since it explains to consumers what they can expect of the brand and discerns what the product is and what one gets from buying it (Fernandes & Moreira, 2019; Keller, 2016; Levitt, 1981). Further, positioning must create a customer-focused value proposition to make the target customer interested in buying the brand (Kotler, 2003). In line, a brand's POD must be perceived as relevant and believable to be qualified as desirable (Keller, 2013). Achieving relevancy requires a proper balance between continuity (not sending conflicting and scattered messages) and change (alignment with innovations and new consumer preferences) (Batra & Keller, 2016). Although one should always be attentive to competitors' positioning strategies, it is crucial not to be too responsive and thus risk walking away from a successful and established position (Keller et al., 2002). Likewise, repositioning a brand is argued to be very challenging, hence a brand's core and context should remain as consistent as possible so consumers can build strong associations with the brand (Keller et al., 2002).

When a company carries a portfolio of multiple brands, it puts another level of complexity to the brand positioning, as different brands usually have different roles to play (Keller, 2013). Because there is a greater risk of cannibalization and overlap between brands regarding consumer perception (Arora & Aribarg, 2008). Therefore, the goal is to develop a brand portfolio mix that increases brand equity through complementary effects (Keller, 2000). Further, differences between markets, such as consumers, culture, trends and regulations (Aaker, 2008; Veloutsou & Delgado-Ballester, 2018), can make global brands suffer from having a position that is not locally relevant for all markets (Steenkramp, 2017).

2.2.1.3 Positioning and Sustainability

Given that brands will vary in the extent their position relies on sustainability activities relative to competitors and in the minds of the consumers, the competitive context will depend upon a brand's position along the sustainability dimension (Du et al., 2007). However, unlike regular brand positioning strategies, successful sustainability positioning requires consumers to genuinely make the associations (Bhattacharya & Sen, 2003). Also, a focused CSR position concerning one societal issue is suggested to increase positive associations and reduce confusion for consumers (Polonsky & Jevons, 2009).

However, developing a clear CSR position requires intensive work and integrated corporate commitment and resources (Lewis, 2003; Werther & Chandler, 2005). Consequently, brands known for having a greener identity or being more socially responsible will more naturally tie their position to sustainability and successfully be associated with it (Du et al., 2007; Keller, 2013). In relation, when CSR is integrated into the initial culture and personality of the corporation, it will be reflected in the brand's positioning (Polonsky & Jevons, 2009). Nevertheless, Vallaster et al. (2012) argue that the level of sustainability positioning should be strategically determined based on the brand's current position. Similarly, global brands operating in multinational firms do not always integrate their sustainability achievements into their brand's positions and communication to avoid potential negative criticisms from a broad set of stakeholders interpreting the issue/definition of sustainability differently (Polonsky & Jevons, 2009).

2.2.2 Institutional Theory

According to institutional theory, organizations are not autonomous units that make decisions and develop strategies in a silo, instead, the institutional environment, external circumstances and social processes highly influence a company's actions and decision-making (DiMaggio & Powell, 1983; Meyer & Rowan, 1977; Scott, 1995). These institutions can be formal and informal in a market, which exercises an ongoing mutual impact on economic decisions and how exchange and competition unfold, thus defining "the rules of the game" (North, 1991). Companies should be looked upon as social structures that reside in organizational fields with relevant actors bound and influenced by their shared environment (DiMaggio & Powell, 1983). Within each field, actors organize themselves around the same rituals, beliefs and values and conform to wider institutions. When repeated action patterns eventually become taken for granted, it creates belief systems and frameworks for how organizations should act which pressure organizations to adapt (DiMaggio & Powell, 1983; Scott, 1995). Institutional environments can create opportunities and challenges for companies (Scott, 1995), thus managers are often faced with a trade-off between choosing efficacy or legitimacy (Yang & Su, 2014). Accordingly, organizations adjust to the same pressures to reduce uncertainties, be accepted and survive in the market, and be perceived as legitimate by the external environment (Deephouse, 1999). The outcome is more homogeneous organizations resulting from institutional isomorphism. Institutional pressure is argued to occur in three types: Coercive, Cognitive and Normative (DiMaggio & Powell, 1983; Scott, 1995).

2.2.2.1 Coercive Pressure

Coercive pressure, also called regulatory pressure, originates from political influence and is closely related to the problem of legitimacy (DiMaggio & Powell, 1983; Scott, 1995). Coercive isomorphism change results from both formal and informal pressure stemming from specific organizations one is dependent upon and societal expectations (DiMaggio

& Powell, 1983). Hence, an organizational action can respond to government mandates, such as environmental regulations, sanctions or tax laws, where some companies will be constrained, others will be empowered, depending on a firm's position and products (DiMaggio & Powell, 1983; Scott, 1995). For instance, the coercive pressure exerts a greater impact on first-movers because, during the initial adoption phase, practice will be either punished or rewarded, which will provide evidence for late movers about the potential benefits of adopting the same practice (Delmas & Montes-Sancho, 2011). Likewise, multinational organizations with cross-country practices can suffer from the variations and complexities in regulations across countries (Delmas & Burbano, 2011). Further, since regulations set the stage for availability and reliability of information about sustainability claims (Delmas & Burbano, 2011), the regulatory context indirectly affect how market actors assess green communication. Lastly, shareholder pressure tends to increase under deregulation, and if environmental initiatives are considered costly, it can result in greenhushing (Kim & Lyon, 2015).

2.2.2.2 Cognitive Pressure

This institutional pressure affects how a company makes sense of the surrounding environment and reality (Scott, 1995). This is based on cognitive beliefs and frames which affect how organizations process and organize information and thus how evaluations, judgments and predictions are made (Scott, 1995). When beliefs and values become internalized into an organization, the employees tend to personally support that behavior in their decision making without a strong connection to the other two means of pressure (Palthe, 2014). Cognitive pressure, also called mimetic pressure, refers to when organizations undertake actions that appear successful, and during uncertainty, mimetic behavior tends to increase (DiMaggio & Powell, 1983). Thus, this pressure becomes advantageous when technologies are poorly understood (March & Olsen, 1976) or when something is ambiguous since it can be solved by copying another market player at little expense (Cyert & March, 1963).

2.2.2.3 Normative Pressure

Normative pressure is related to professionalism, thus an externally driven pressure formed by cultural influences, such as norms and values from professional standards, practices and networks (Scott, 1995). Hence, based on perceived appropriate actions and expectations from society, it prescribes how actors should act, and organizations feel an obligation or responsibility to behave accordingly (Selznick, 1948). Furthermore, companies are more likely to focus on informal structure and the immediate environment of organizations rather than on formal structure and the general cultural rules coming from the society at large (Selznick, 1948). Further, Strannegård (2000) found that a CEO's personal conviction for environmental management becomes a strong normative element for strategies to take form. Lastly, early adopters can, to a greater extent, suffer from deficient normative forces at the beginning of a diffusion phase as new practices lack social consensus concerning their value (Delmas & Montes-Sancho, 2011).

2.3 Synthesis of Literature Review

The above literature review presents and links three theoretical areas: greenhushing, strategic brand positioning and institutional theory. As highlighted, greenhushing is a nascent research field, thus what still remains a question is *why* companies conduct greenhushing and what circumstances can explain the behavior. Therefore, by adding the two closely related, more mature research fields, strategic brand positioning and institutional theory, it can advance the explanation for why greenhushing occurs. Research indicates a close overlap between positioning and how green communication unfolds (Font et al., 2012; Ginder et al., 2019; Polonsky & Jevons, 2009; Vallaster et al., 2012). Nevertheless, extant studies on greenhushing have not adequately explained how a brand's positioning influences greenhushing behavior. Also, as the research on strategic brand positioning claims that the position is the foundation and thus determines the direction of the communication, argues that greenhushing will depend on a brand's position (Aaker & Shansby, 1982; Crawford, 1985; Perreault & McCarthy, 1996).

Furthermore, as greenhushing is decision-making within a company, one must understand that a company's decision-making is shaped and impacted by both internal and external circumstances, which is bound to its institutional environment (DiMaggio & Powell, 1983; Hoffman, 2001; Meyer & Rowan, 1977; Scott, 1995). As institutions pressure a company to act in a certain way to gain legitimacy and market acceptance, the theory can potentially explain irrational or inefficient behaviors, such as greenhushing. Additionally, institutional theory has successfully been applied to understanding greenwashing behavior (Delmas & Burbano, 2011; Lyon & Montgomery, 2015). While greenwashing and greenhushing are opposite behaviors, they are alike in that a company's environmental performance is separate from its communication, which advocates for a similar approach when studying greenhushing. Therefore, incorporating institutional theory will enrich the understanding and explanation for the circumstances conducive to greenhushing within a company. This threefold combination of theories represents an interesting research gap that this thesis aims to fill, which is why greenhushing occurs and how it can be explained by the brand's positioning strategy and the company's institutional environment. The centerpiece in figure 3 illustrates the research gap, thus how greenhushing will be investigated in the light of this theoretical setting.

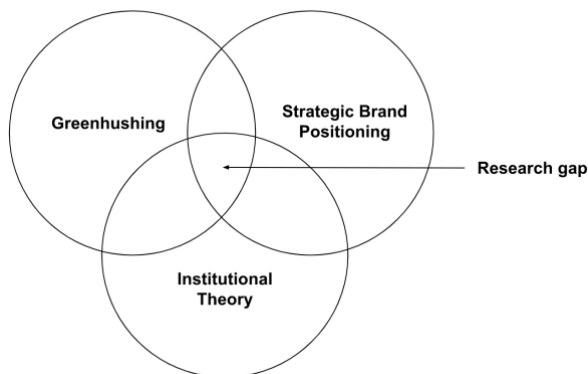


Figure 3 - Illustration of the research gap

2.4 Theoretical Framework

Given the limited research on greenhushing, no established framework has yet been developed to analyze the phenomenon. Therefore, the authors have developed a new theoretical framework to structure and illustrate how the theoretical fields are connected and how they will be used to guide the analysis and support answering the thesis's research questions (see Figure 4).

The institutional theory offers a central perspective as it provides “the rules of the game” and can thus help to explain why companies act in a certain way due to their institutional environment. Hence, building a theoretical framework that draws from institutional theory can shed light on a company’s internal and external circumstances conducive to greenhushing and thus the influence on the current established drivers. However, the institutional environment and company-specific circumstances cannot alone explain why greenhushing occurs. Hence, the dimension of strategic brand positioning is a vital circumstance to include to better explain the drivers leading to greenhushing and companies’ proneness to the behavior. Lastly, the current established drivers are found in the center being contingent on company-specific internal and external circumstances and strategic brand positioning. As the arrows illustrate, the different parts are connected as these combined can explain why greenhushing occurs and, in some instances, affect each other. Thus, institutionalism sets the stage for the environment a company operates in and indirectly affects the following parts. The internal and external circumstances, by nature, affect a company’s decision-making and influence the drivers for greenhushing and strategic brand positioning as these are decision-making within the company. Consequently, as the institutional environment, internal and external circumstances and strategic brand positioning are expected to differ between each company, the drivers for greenhushing will unfold differently, and accordingly, will greenhushing will be conducted more or less.

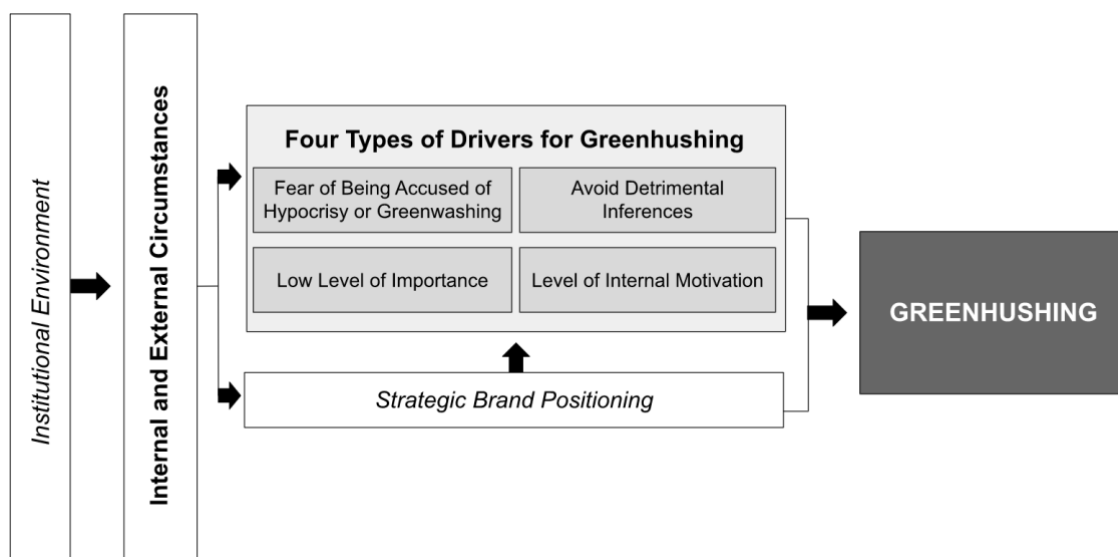


Figure 4 - Theoretical framework for greenhushing

3. Methodology

This chapter describes the methodological research approach, beginning with the reasoning behind the chosen method (3.1). Thereafter, the research design and research approach are described (3.2), followed by a detailed presentation of the data collection process (3.3). The data analysis outlines how the collected data is analyzed (3.4). Lastly, quality (3.5) and ethical considerations (3.6) are evaluated and reflected upon.

3.1 Methodological Fit

This thesis has an exploratory purpose that seeks to gain new insights and understandings of the complex empirical phenomenon of greenhushing (Eisenhardt, 1989; Saunders et al., 2009). Therefore, a qualitative method was chosen as it is suitable for achieving a more profound understanding, meaningful information and a detailed description of a problem (Bell et al., 2019). Also, a qualitative approach is advantageous when the aim is to understand underlying causes and the human perception of a phenomenon (Patel & Davidson, 2019), such as specific drivers or circumstances for greenhushing related to the research questions of this thesis. Further, greenhushing is a relatively unexplored area that calls for more analysis (Carlos & Lewis, 2018; Kim & Lyon, 2015; Schoeneborn, 2017), and the lack of practical knowledge is highlighted (Falchi et al., 2022). Thus, observations in a real-life setting gathered through a qualitative approach can allow new theoretical propositions (Bell et al., 2019). Hence, the qualitative method is conducted through a single-case study and semi-structured interviews, which is an appropriate way of collecting data when seeking an in-depth understanding of something where limited previous knowledge exists and when having open-ended questions related to how, what and why (Bell et al., 2019; Braun & Clarke, 2013; Yin, 2014). Finally, given the unknown research area and prevailing research gap within greenhushing this thesis aims to fill, a qualitative method is preferred as it allows for flexibility and an open-minded approach that can identify and interpret new patterns about the phenomenon (Edmondson & McManus, 2007).

3.2 Research Design

3.2.1 Single-case Study

For the purpose of this thesis, a single-case study approach was considered most suitable. The method focuses on understanding the dynamics present within a single setting and is especially appropriate in new topic areas, such as greenhushing (Eisenhardt, 1989; Eisenhardt & Graebner, 2007). Also, it enables researchers to dive deep into real-life situations and investigate views directly concerning a phenomenon as it unfolds in practice (Flyvbjerg, 2006). Additionally, Yin (2014) claims that a case study method should be used when researchers want to uncover contextual conditions considered highly relevant to the phenomenon studied, such as the circumstances for greenhushing.

The selection of the case company was made through a purposive sampling method, which is appropriate when a specific case is considered particularly informative for answering the research question (Ishak & Abu Bakar, 2014; Patton, 2002). Therefore, three selection criteria were established when identifying a suitable organization, three selection criteria were established. (1) The company should have established objectives related to environmental sustainability, (2) the interviewees should manage several brands to enable capture of various settings and dimensions affecting greenhushing, and (3) it should be a company with a size large enough that it is managing the expectations of several stakeholders and that its communication reaches a substantial amount of consumers. Following a thorough first stage of the case selection process where organizations from different industries were considered, one case company within the FMCG industry was considered representative and selected as it fulfilled all three criteria. Additionally, evidence of greenhushing at the case company was established early in the interview process to further ensure that it was a suitable company for the purpose of the research. Yin (2014) highlights that using a representative case is an important circumstance motivating why a single-case study is suitable. While the case company is treated anonymously to ensure confidentiality, an introduction to the company is presented in chapter 4.1.

Although a multiple-case study could be preferable due to increased generalizability (Bell et al., 2019) and potential comparison between companies. Instead, this study aims to gain a deeper understanding of the recently established greenhushing phenomenon. Additionally, given the limited existing literature, a single-case study is considered enough for theory development (Easton, 2010). Also, the chosen company operates different brands across categories and product types, thus this single case study can still capture a broad view of different drivers and circumstances within one case company.

3.2.2 Abductive Research Approach

This thesis has adopted an abductive approach since it prevents the limitations of choosing either a deductive or inductive approach, i.e., testing existing theory or building new theory (Bell et al., 2019). Given the incomplete set of observations within greenhushing research, the abductive method allows for the necessary flexibility to develop new insights by moving “back and forth” between the theoretical framework and empirical data being collected and developed simultaneously (Dubois & Gadde, 2002). Thus, the abductive method enables guidance from existing theories while also testing and developing new explanations from the observed reality, where alteration and reflection are possible along the way (Dubois & Gadde, 2002; Patel & Davidson, 2019).

3.3 Data collection

3.3.1 Interview Sample

The selection of interviewees was made through a purposive sampling method, i.e., interviewees were selected based on their relevance to the research questions and not on their representation of the population (Bell et al., 2019; Flick, 2009). Also, purposive sampling, including a non-probability-based selection, contributes to more in-depth interviews, thus valuable when answering the research questions (Bell et al., 2019). The sampling was based on three criteria to capture relevant insights and various perspectives. (1) The interviewees worked with different brands, categories, and hierarchical levels and departments, allowing for capturing any discrepancies or contradictory perceptions given their different experiences (Yin, 2011). (2) The interviewees had a close relation to the consumer communication by either being the decision-maker or affecting the decision making. (3) The interviewees were evenly represented across the categories to receive a nuanced picture and saturation for each category. The interviewees were selected in collaboration with a contact person at the case company to ensure the selection criteria and reduce selection bias.

All interviewees worked in the case company's Nordic subsidiary. Whereas the majority worked in the marketing department, a few worked in Research and Development (R&D). Altogether, 20 interviews were conducted, totaling 1078 minutes. The aim was to reach theoretical saturation with the numbers of respondents, so without having decided the amount beforehand, the interviews stopped once the data collected was deemed sufficient to answer the research questions (Bell et al., 2019; Bowen, 2008; Strauss & Corbin, 1998). More detailed information about the interviews and respondents' roles can be found in Appendix 1. To guarantee anonymity for the interviewees, no further details about the respondents will be provided.

3.3.2 Interview Design

In-depth interviews following a semi-structured approach with open-ended questions were deemed most suitable since it enables a deeper understanding and rich answers from the respondent's perceptions, behavior, and experiences regarding greenhushing (Bell et al., 2019; Braun & Clarke, 2013; Yin, 2014). Furthermore, open-ended questions about a complex phenomenon can cause broad variations in answers, thus semi-structured interviews are appropriate as they allow greater flexibility and further exploration when needed (Edmondson & McManus, 2007). Following the logic for semi-structure, the questions followed a sequence of themes but with low structure and low standardization to avoid steering the respondents in one direction (Bell et al., 2019; Patel & Davidsson, 2019). The interview guide (see Appendix 2) included background questions and was developed following the literature review, and the theoretical framework functioned as a base to ensure that relevant aspects were covered. Still, no questions included the term "greenhushing", due to the risk of having leading questions (Yin, 2009). Instead, it was

arguable to use the term "environmental sustainability communication", and the authors were responsible for judging the level of the communication concerning their actions in the analysis. The sequence of the questions and the questions themselves were revised during the interview depending on the respondents' roles, follow-up questions, and probing techniques. Hence, one main question could lead to several probing questions to draw more complete stories and reflections (Berg & Lune, 2017). Thus, this relatively low standardization and structure led to a natural flow and motivated the interviewees to speak freely, which enabled a dialogue with the respondents leading to more details and honest answers (Bell et al., 2019; Berg & Lune, 2017). Hence, the interview guide was modified as the interview process went along and emergent findings appeared, optimizing the interview questions and answers obtained (Bell et al., 2019; Dubois & Gadde, 2002).

All interviewees were informed by email before the interviews about the purpose of the study and their anonymity. Due to Covid-19, all interviews were held digitally on Microsoft Teams, a necessary safety consideration despite the advantage of conducting interviews in a physical environment where one's attention and body language can be captured better (Bell et al., 2019). However, the respondents agreed to have video calls which created a setting like face-to-face interviews, which is beneficial in qualitative research (Bell et al., 2019; Deakin & Wakefield, 2014). Also, digital interviews can make the interviewees feel safer and more relaxed being in their environment. Consequently, the digital setup made it possible to gain a deep understanding from the respondents. The interviews lasted for around 40-80 minutes, and all the respondents approved to be recorded. While recording can lead to withholding from the interviewee (Patel & Davidson, 2019), recording enables the authors to pay more attention and listen to the interviewee, which is crucial in qualitative studies (Yin, 2011). Also, easier to capture the whole discussion and a greater level of accuracy (Bell et al., 2019). Additionally, the transcriptions were sent to the participants for validation before it was used in the analysis.

The interviews were conducted individually with each respondent to reduce the potential risk of group pressure influencing the answers, truthfulness and confidentiality (Bell et al., 2019). Moreover, the interviewees decided what language they felt most comfortable using during the interview to minimize any language barrier (Roulston & Choi, 2018). Hence interviews were held in both English and Swedish. Further, both authors participated actively during all interviews to reduce interpretation biases and pay attention to different things (Bechhofer et al., 1984). Even if one person was responsible for leading the interview and the other primarily took notes, the authors aimed for a relaxed setting allowing the interviewers to switch roles during the interview and improve the chance of a conversation (Bechhofer et al., 1984). After each interview, the authors discussed initial thoughts to capture insights that otherwise could be lost when waiting until transcription, allowing for an ongoing analysis (Patel & Davidson, 2019).

3.4 Data Analysis

The data analysis was done according to the thematic analysis method presented by Braun and Clarke (2006) to identify, analyze and report themes within the qualitative data (Bell et al., 2019; Braun & Clarke, 2006). The advantage of this method is its flexibility (Braun & Clarke, 2006) and that it can provide a rich and detailed account of data (King, 2004). Hence, suitable for studying novel research areas, such as greenhushing.

The first phase of the analysis was to get familiar with the data (Braun & Clarke, 2006), which was done in parallel with the data collection. The data was transcribed within 24 hours after each interview while the interview observations were still fresh in memory (Patel & Davidson, 2019). Both authors reviewed the transcriptions several times to generate interesting and meaningful codes for the phenomenon studied (Boyatzis, 1998). The initial coding process was done systematically and across the entire data set to ensure complete and equal attention to each data item and repeated patterns (Braun & Clarke, 2006). To ensure investigator triangulation, both authors did this individually and then compared to reduce bias and ensure quality (Barratt et al., 2011; Bell et al., 2019; Nowell et al., 2017). Likewise, notes taken during the interview process and internal company documents were reviewed simultaneously to achieve data triangulation, limiting individual biases and confirming facts mentioned during the interviews (Bell et al., 2019; Patel & Davidson, 2019; Yin, 2014). The subsequent phase involved sorting the different codes into potential themes and analyzing the relationships. Thus, the identified different theme levels were translated into sub-themes and main themes (Braun & Clarke, 2006), as illustrated in Appendix 3. The abductive approach of the study implied that some themes were constructed with the theoretical framework as a base, while others emerged solely from the empirical data. The latter allowed identification of drivers and circumstances of greenhushing that were not evident in previous research.

Lastly, since the interviews were held in both Swedish and English, the transcriptions and quotes in Swedish had to be translated into English which was deemed a limitation regarding the interpretive obstacle (Temple & Young, 2004). However, to ensure the accuracy of the translations, both authors checked each quote and reflected on how the translations could be as correctly linguistically as possible (Czarniawska, 2004).

3.5 Quality of Study

To ensure the trustworthiness of the study, the four quality criteria for trustworthiness presented by Lincoln and Guba (1985) were deemed appropriate for evaluating the study's quality.

3.5.1 Credibility

The credibility in qualitative research addresses the “fit” between the worldview of respondents and the way it is presented by the authors (Korstjens & Moser, 2018; Lincoln

& Guba, 1985; Tobin & Begley, 2004). Considering credibility becomes especially relevant in this thesis since greenhushing is studied through human views, perceptions and interpretations. According to the techniques to address credibility (Lincoln & Guba, 1985), the authors conducted data and investigator triangulation and member validation. The latter was done to reassure that the authors had understood the social world of the interviewees correctly (Bell et al., 2019; Korstjens & Moser, 2018; Lincoln & Guba, 1985). Moreover, the variety of interviewees being evenly distributed across different categories, brands, and hierarchical levels enhance credibility.

3.5.2 Transferability

Transferability refers to the generalizability of the study (Bell et al., 2019). Qualitative case studies typically entail the intensive study of groups or individuals, thus depth rather than breadth, that is contextually unique to the research outcome. Thus, it is not the task of the researchers to make precise statements about generalizability (Lincoln & Guba, 1985), qualitative research should instead produce thick descriptions (Geertz, 1973). Therefore, the authors provided a detailed description of the context of the case company and their greenhushing behavior, and those seeking to transfer the findings must judge the possible transferability (Bell et al., 2019; Korstjens & Moser, 2018; Lincoln & Guba, 1985).

3.5.3 Dependability

Dependability relates to the stability of findings over time (Bell et al., 2019; Korstjens & Moser, 2018; Lincoln & Guba, 1985). Thus, the authors ensure that the research process was logical, traceable and documented (Lincoln & Guba, 1985; Tobin & Begley, 2004). Further, the supervisor conducted an inquiry audit and monitored the process regularly to assess the degree to which theoretical inferences could be justified (Bell et al., 2019).

3.5.4 Confirmability

Confirmability entails that the findings should be as independent as possible from the author's personal and theoretical biases (Bell et al., 2019; Lincoln & Guba, 1985). Therefore, the authors practiced reflexivity and considered how one could affect the research outcome and kept an open dialogue about it throughout the research process. Thus, confirmability is established when credibility, transferability and dependability are all achieved (Guba & Lincoln, 1989). To keep the research transparent, the authors have thoroughly described the reasons for theoretical, methodological and analytical decisions to enable others to comprehend the choices made. Thus, an audit approach was adopted to provide readers with evidence of decisions (Koch, 1994). Additionally, open questions during the interviews and data and investigator triangulation further minimize bias and strengthen confirmability (Bell et al., 2019; Lincoln & Guba, 1985).

3.6 Ethical Consideration

The thesis has been conducted with respect to ethical considerations. Hence, ethical rules and guidelines have been followed concerning how individuals were treated and the study's objectives (Bell et al., 2019). The interviewees were informed about the thesis purpose, publication, and intended contribution and assured that the information given would be handled with confidentiality, anonymity and only be used for this purpose (Bell et al., 2019). After that, the interviewee needed to consent to participate in the study and permission to be recorded (Bell et al., 2019). Further, no personal data was presented in the thesis to ensure anonymity for the case company and respondents. Finally, the GDPR-regulations were followed; the personal data collected was deleted after the interviews, and recordings and videos were deleted after the transcriptions were done. The transcriptions containing no sensitive data were stored in secure cloud storage when the thesis was written.

4. Empirical Findings

This chapter presents the empirical findings of this study, starting by introducing the case company (4.1). Followed by five different chapters representing the themes that emerged from the data collection; Organizational complexity (4.2), Internal motivation (4.3), Avoid Scrutiny (4.4), Managing the brands (4.5) and Sustainability development (4.5).

4.1 The Case Company

The case company is a leading multinational FMCG company that produces and markets consumer goods used by over 3 billion people every day. FMCG is one of the biggest industries in the world, and it is known for its consumable products that are high in turnover and sold at a relatively low cost at retailers. The case company owns over 300 brands available in around 200 countries across four big categories: Foods, Ice Cream, Beauty and Personal Care (BPC), and Home Care. The categories, including their product types and main category drivers, are highlighted in table 1. Given its size and global operation, the company is divided into different regions. The Nordics, consisting of Sweden, Norway, Finland and Denmark, is the region studied for the scope of this thesis. Furthermore, the case company has established a corporate sustainability strategy, which is the foundation of its business model, brands, communication and operations. The highly incorporated sustainability approach has resulted in recognition as a sustainability leader in different areas by organizations such as Dow Jones Sustainability World Index, Gartner, GlobeScan and non-profit groups such as CDP.

Category	Product Type	Main Category Drivers
Foods	Soups, bouillons, sauces, snacks, mayonnaise, dressing and mustard	Taste, texture, convenience, nutrition, price
Ice Cream	Dessert, pines, big pack, pieces	Taste, indulgence, texture, availability, price
Beauty and Personal Care (BPC)	Deodorants, skin cleansing, oral care, hair care and skin care	Efficacy, sensorial experience, caring, hygiene, price
Home Care	Laundry detergent, fabric softener, surface cleaning, toilet cleaning and dishwash	Efficacy, performance, hygiene, fragrance, price

Table 1 - Category overview

4.2 Organizational Complexity

4.2.1 Structure

The Nordics is a small local region within this giant corporation. Thus, the company's resource allocation and autonomy structure followed a 70-20-10 rule, meaning that 70% of the projects are strategized globally and executed locally, 20% are mutually developed and executed between local and global, and 10% are entirely on a local level.

Consequently, despite being able to adapt to a certain extent, the local communication depended on whether the global team focused on sustainability and if it was perceived as relevant for the local market.

*"We are dependent on what communication the global team is focusing on [...]
Recently I removed a claim about 'naturally derived ingredients' because I learned
that the Finnish consumer did not perceive it as relevant." - R19*

Being bound to the global strategies and communication also created a hurdle due to differences in the regulatory contexts, both global versus local, due to lack of local legal support, and on a local level since they operate in four countries with different languages and regulations.

*"It's important to consider both regulation and language differences. Since I neither
know the law very well nor all the Nordic languages, I tend to go for the safer options
when it comes to green claims." - R12*

Furthermore, global brands had been prioritized for sustainability initiatives, hence receiving more developed positioning and communication strategies. This made the local brands suffer from not receiving any communication materials even if the brand had sustainability advantages.

*"My brand is a global priority brand, there are global initiatives and the information
is served to me. When I worked for a local brand, it was one person from the global
team versus the 40 people I have now." - R6*

4.2.2 Processes

The respondents considered the processes within the company to be rigid and inflexible. Thus, some claimed that it could take one year to act upon an identified consumer trend, partly because of the internal processes and the retailers' strict trade windows for when a new or updated product can be launched. This made changes difficult, and their brands suffered compared to local competitors that could be more adaptive and proactive in their communication.

*"Our processes for new communication and launches make changes difficult.
Everything must be evaluated and signed off by different stakeholders. Especially for
sustainability communication, we need to follow processes to make sure all internal
stakeholders such as legal, R&D and the global brand team sign off on the
communication." - R13*

Hence, legal and R&D were involved in many processes to thoroughly assess the support for the communication to not put them at risk of being accused of, e.g., greenwashing. However, some respondents argued that while it is good to be on the safe side and necessary due to their type of company, the long lead times made it difficult to quickly act upon an identified trend or competitor insight. Further, most respondents argued that there are so many ongoing sustainability initiatives globally that they cannot be aware of

all of them. Thus, only the initiatives deemed important for the local market were cascaded down from the global team.

“Globally, we do so many sustainability initiatives, so I cannot say that I'm aware of all of them. Also, there are so many initiatives we're doing outside our brands, and those aren't communicated locally.” - R5

4.2.3 Retailers as Gatekeepers

The retailers were particularly emphasized as challenging stakeholders since they are vital gatekeepers for selling the brands' products. Therefore, both their sales expectations and sustainability agendas were taken into account. While their primary driver was price, margins and shelf-rotation, they still demanded the biggest players, such as the case company, to drive the sustainability work in their categories.

“Although retailers expect that we innovate more environmentally sustainable products, it comes down to the bottom line and to what ice cream they believe consumers will buy. It challenges us when not even the greenest retailer sees it as a natural step to launch vegan products.” - R18

However, the retailers' dual focus was challenging since green products neither have low prices nor high shelf rotation. Therefore, the respondents argued that they paid more attention to sustainability in their communication to retailers but not consumers to ensure sales and shelf rotation.

4.2.4 High Level of Responsibility

The case company's way of taking responsibility was evident in how they closely collaborated with the UN and the global sustainability goals, also involvement in building and driving environmental standard improvements in e.g., palm oil, deforestation projects, and MSC-certifications. While stakeholders expected that they take responsibility due to their size, they also internally wished to be role models at the forefront of environmental innovations and sustainable development.

“With great power comes great responsibility. There aren't that many companies where you can have this much impact [...] of course this can be used as a competitive advantage, but you should not underestimate the breakthrough we have on the environment.” - R6

The respondents emphasized the actions that make a difference on a larger scale. Thus, small local companies may look more sustainable because the case company's sustainability efforts do not always end up in local brand communication due to lack of relevance for specific brands.

“Even if we cut down on some environmental communication due to brand position, we will not cut down on the environmental work. We must think of the climate footprint and credibility we have as a big corporation.” - R7

4.3 Internal Motivation

The interviewees highlighted that sustainability is in the company's roots, thus being a major part of its history. Many referred to it as the company's DNA and how they and the CEO passionately believe in sustainability.

"The new CEO is really taking this to a new level and stretching the targets. A quote from the CEO is 'Go green or die like a dinosaur'." - R4

Taking the right initiatives and doing the right thing regarding environmental change was expressed by most respondents to be more important than communicating it externally.

"We work the other way around and focus on building a chain of different sustainability initiatives. This is not something we communicate, but we feel confident with what we do, so why advertise it." - R18

Although the respondents acknowledged that their environmental ambitions are high for their type of company and operations, and thus they are on a long journey toward being a fully sustainable business.

"Things take time, and we are not fully sustainable yet, but we are working towards a shift and always striving towards 100%. In the meantime, we have to be satisfied that we are not as strong compared to 'pure' green brands." - R14

Furthermore, all respondents referred to a specific and ambitious sustainability program introduced over ten years ago, one of the first in the market. However, it had been primarily internal, and the goals had been inward-facing, and only recently, the sustainability initiatives had been translated and integrated into the brands.

"The initiatives were more focused on internal operation, such as minimizing our waste and footprint, and using renewable energy in the factories. Hence, less on the consumer front, but nowadays we are trying to make our sustainability commitment much more on the consumer." - R3

Nevertheless, it was also emphasized that sustainability became a business priority and incorporated into the brands when they realized its external relevance and business value, such as competitive edge, cost-benefit and preparation for future legislation. Hence, the internal motivation for sustainability was not only driven by altruism but also by business objectives.

"We started before it became a trend, but now it is even more vital to follow the market and not fall behind." - R10

"In the end, we do everything to sell since we are a for-profit corporation, but we have always done it with very high morals and ethics. Now you also see that it's something that consumers demand and therefore we now add it to every brand." - R2

"It's a trade-off between big sellers and better for the environment products, such as vegan. We try to promote both, but we have sales targets after all." - R12

4.4 Avoid Scrutiny

The respondents expressed how they as a company are very diligent and rigorous in what they do, say and claim when it comes to green communication. The fact that all brands are connected to one corporate entity entails a reputational risk since if one is challenged, it puts all brands at risk. Thus, the respondents argued that it is all about not risking the brand's reputation and negatively being exposed in the media. Nevertheless, sometimes they felt too conservative and risk-averse compared to competitors.

"There is always a balance, but especially when it comes to big global brands since whatever we communicate in Sweden can be picked up globally and easily be misinterpreted due to cultural or language differences." - R6

"We choose not to communicate about sustainability because it creates so many opinions. We make ice cream and shouldn't express ourselves too politically, we know we are doing so much good, and by involving ourselves too much, it might create more badwill than goodwill." - R18

In relation, the respondents expressed a certain fear of being accused of doing something wrong, particularly greenwashing was mentioned as a concern since FMCG companies tend to be more exposed to this and often put in the box as the culprit.

"People tend to be more critical towards bigger companies, what we do and claim to do. [...] Bigger brands are sometimes seen as "big and evil" so it might come down to trust issues and perceived greenwashing." - R5

"[Brand] was accused of greenwashing in the media, even though the accusation was incorrect, and they just angled a statement as greenwashing. This made us mindful of how we communicated, maybe even a bit more withdrawn in our green communication." - R17

Thus, the trust and credibility issues reinforced the importance of a transparent and careful approach to communication not to risk being misleading and thus wrongfully accused. The fear of skepticism made them concerned about how their communication would look in the eyes of consumers and authorities. This turned into precautionary behavior, where one respondent had removed green claims from a cleaning product even if it was greener than competitors due to the fear of greenwashing accusation because a cleaning product "must contain dangerous chemicals".

"The market has been overflowed with sustainability claims, which has led to confusing consumers and low trust in claims. Thus, it is hard to be perceived as real in the category." - R1

"We are so incredibly careful, and we don't communicate anything that can be misinterpreted because there are so many authorities and consumers that monitor it." - R20

To reduce the risk of accusation and make sure all claims are legitimate and compliant, they constantly made risk-assessments and studied competitors' greenwashing cases due

to the still relatively unregulated market for sustainability communication. The constant oversight also made some of the respondents driven to do better because seeing how bad reputation some have gotten from previous greenwashing accusations.

“We constantly look at competitors and learn from greenwashing cases. It affects how we communicate sustainability through our brands.” - R9

“I’m finding it hard with [Competitor] which has both eco-line and discounter line, similarly [Competitor] claimed that their detergent is natural. Seeing that makes you want to act completely opposite.” - R7

Lastly, the respondents discussed that the percentage level of a sustainability claim is relevant for how they communicated to not risk being questioned about the potentially remaining part.

“It’s a balance between wanting to have strong claims but not being able to claim anything due to the risk of being accused of greenwashing. We aim to use %-level to be transparent. But when not having 100%, consumers may wonder what the rest is all about.” - R2

“Sometimes we include the biodegradability claim, but it depends on the percentage level we have for the product in each country, when below 90%, we often exclude it in communication.” - R19

4.5 Managing The Brands

4.5.1 Portfolio Prioritization

Since all the brands operated in a bigger portfolio within each category, they could not be equally supported. Hence prioritization within each portfolio was made due to resource limitations. Following chapter 4.2.1, the global team steered the local team to focus on global priority brands for green communication since it had been incorporated into their positions and communication strategies. The downside was the difficulties in competing against local green niche brands as they often only operated one brand in one market, their communication could be more relevant to local consumers.

“It’s a clear prioritization in the portfolio, we put all our efforts in the bigger brands, because we have found their green position and incorporated it into the brands. We don’t have so much material for small local brands either and global support with everything for the bigger ones.” - R15

4.5.2 Brand Fit and Positioning

The interviewees emphasized that their choice of communication always falls back on a communication plan built upon the brands’ positions. Which at times did not align with the company’s sustainability journey because sustainability could not be added to every brand due to its current position and products. Consequently, sustainability was considered either an undesired attribute or a tricky process to build into a brand position.

“I understand the intention of communicating everything we do within sustainability, but suddenly we lose the point of the actual product. [...] It is about consistently driving these brands and sometimes separately communicating the sustainability work.” - R18

“We have managed to build sustainability into parts of our brand, and even if we could add more, it must be in line and connected to the brand. Also, we need to find separate sustainability questions for each brand to focus on to reduce confusion in the portfolio.” - R9

Thus, if sustainability were to be incorporated, it must be progressively and adequately built and packaged into the brand to make it credible, a process that could take over a decade according to some respondents. Nevertheless, greenness should not overshadow what signifies the brand.

“It's a premium ice cream brand focused on pop-culture. It's not enough to add 'recyclable plastic' as a claim as we haven't built the whole brand image around sustainability, instead it must emerge over time. You need to have respect for the brand's history and why the brand has become successful.” - R6

Hence, it was argued that what determines if a brand can communicate about environmental sustainability depends on brand positioning and identity. In turn, when green communication was the objective, it often required brand repositioning, which was argued to be complicated.

“We have many traditional brands that aren't green from scratch. Still, we tried to reposition our biggest laundry brand last year to be more sustainable, but it wasn't a success and we heavily lost market shares because when communicating about sustainability we lost our core attributes being cleaning efficacy.” - R3

“[Brand] originates from the US, and due to the common feeling that they are not so sustainable, our credibility for sustainability becomes lower. It's a challenging journey for us to turn this around since there is a consumer perception that only local brands are in the forefront of sustainability.” - R15

Further, while some respondents felt restricted in communicating about environmental benefits, others meant that a brand's position can outweigh the desire for environmental communication.

“[Brand] focus on social responsibility, therefore we aren't pushing so much on our environmentally sustainable messages. This is a trade-off because we would risk shifting away from our purpose and jeopardize our successful position and brand power.” - R5

“It's our position to deliver absolute hygiene for the consumers that have high demands on cleaning and hygiene, so I have removed the green elements and natural claims to not adventure this successful position.” - R1

4.5.3 Message Hierarchy

Naturally, the brands' positions affected how the communication was prioritized. Some respondents referred to a message hierarchy that they follow for each brand. Where environmental sustainability became first for some brands, it was secondary for most. Furthermore, the potential addition of a secondary claim depended on whether the first message had landed in the consumers' minds clearly and sufficiently.

"Taste is number one and then a second claim could potentially be sustainability. It depends on your brand position and what part of the market you can target with it." - R6

"Efficacy is always the base, and we must deliver on that, then depending on which benefit space you want to tap into there might be a secondary benefit to cover." - R1

"There are still things left to do for some brands, such as increasing awareness or landing a proposition. Thus, we need to land that before we can start promoting sustainability." - R11

Even if sustainability was not the number one message, third party eco-labels, such as the Nordic Swan, Fairtrade, EU-ecolabel, Vegan society, and Rainforest Alliance, were still highly used on product packages. Mainly due to being a hygiene factor and industry standards and partly authority biased. Nevertheless, the Home Care category argued that the labels still efficiently promote sustainability due to their high standards.

"We haven't communicated environmental sustainability so much because it has quickly become a hygiene factor. Even if we were the first-mover in PCR plastic and PETA, many have followed us and then our uniqueness goes away." - R10

"In the Nordics, eco-certification is a hygiene factor, almost all products have it and it's demanded from the retailers. So, even though we are somehow forced policy-wise to invest in it, we still want to communicate with eco-labels due to its high standards." - R3

However, the respondents claimed that sustainability in itself is no longer a competitive advantage or a consumer purchase driver. Hence, green communication was argued to be withheld until they had found the right way to communicate it. Also, some argued that they must connect the environmental claim to a consumer benefit to make it relevant and purchase driven.

"Some environmental claims are no longer selling points. Communication is changing. If you want sustainability to be the key thing, you need to find the most powerful message for your brand." - R20

"The collaboration with [Recycling Partner] is important since no competitors are working with them, it puts us in the forefront, and by giving consumers refunds for throwing their ice cream paper in the trash, it is also a clear consumer benefit." - R18

4.5.4 Consumer Consideration

Consumer interest and demand were mentioned as critical aspects when deciding what is relevant to communicate. Despite the sustainability trends in the Nordics, the respondents claimed sustainability was still not the primary basis for purchase since consumers care more about the main category drivers such as taste, performance or price. Hence, depending on what resonates with consumers' preferences, this led to communication around less impactful areas or no green communication at all.

"Potentially there are other claims to use, but I don't consider that, because if it's not relevant for consumers it won't lead to purchase." - R1

"When indulgence is the strongest consumer driver, and sustainability is perceived as nice to have but not a purchase motivator, the final choice becomes easy..." - R17

This relates to the brand's target consumers and having a wide target group across markets was challenging. As it implies that they must balance different needs, both the green and general mainstream consumers. Thus, one respondent mentioned that the outcome sometimes leads to less green boldness in communication to achieve "one size fits all".

"If we move too much into a green proposition, we lose our current loyal consumers who are looking for mainstream benefits. Hence, it's a trade-off between recruiting new consumers looking for green products without losing core users." - R3

Furthermore, green communication was partly withheld due to consumers' perceived negative associations with specific product types. This particularly regarded those with functional attributes, such as detergents, cleaning sprays, deodorants or toothpaste, mainly driven by efficacy or performance. The respondents argued that most people believe a green product is less effective and that consumers will not buy products if the greenness is perceived to come at the expense of core attributes.

"It is a tough balance in how much we should push green communication, because even if our detergent is as effective as before but now it's green, Lisa 40 with three kids will think it's less effective. To avoid that, we cut back on environmental claims and focus on the fact that our product removes stains since that is the main focus when you buy detergents." - R7

However, the Food category has rather the opposite associations, such as "organic", "plant-based", and "natural" are perceived by consumers to be top quality. Nevertheless, some respondents mentioned that consumers still have detrimental inferences regarding vegan products, thus affecting their choice of communication.

"We don't want to communicate 'made of peas' or 'vegan', instead more low key, such as 'better for the planet'. Then consumers dare to try and realize that it's as good as before. Thus, we first must convince consumers about the taste, then we can communicate more about the vegan part." - R18

4.5.5 Competitor Consideration

The communication was also dependent upon competitors' actions. The respondents claimed to look at competitors to understand what everyone else is doing, what is relevant and trending to meet the industry standards, and what could be a competitive advantage.

"Competitors that are coming with new disruptive innovations or focus on certain communication create new kinds of demands from consumers and this affects what we prioritize in communication." - R16

Furthermore, given that sustainability is a common trend in the Nordics, the competitive field within sustainability was perceived as fierce. Hence, some respondents expressed concern about how they study "green competitors" because it is hard to cut through when all players are perceived to be more or less the same.

"It's a problem since we want to find a competitive advantage, and when we look so much on competitors and their claims, we will never get the first-mover advantage, also everyone ends up using the same claim." - R2

Other respondents referred to their differences in positioning strategies when competing in the sustainability field. Because green competitors have another area of expertise and message hierarchy, they become more trusted by consumers.

"We tend to look at [Competitor] because people think they are super environmentally friendly. In fact, our products have the same or better environmental levels as them, but since they have a green identity from the start, we won't beat them at that consumer perception. Which makes it hard for us to communicate greenness." - R19

4.6 Sustainability Development

4.6.1 Regulatory

For some parts where the regulations got quite far, such as within plastic, the respondents argued that it increased their focus on PCR plastic in their communication, even if they faced difficulties due to the countries' various regulations and languages. Similarly, when single-use plastic was banned, plastic became a hot discussion in the press, which affected consumers' expectations, and in turn their communication. Although there are some regulations regarding sustainability communication. The respondents emphasized that it is a new area with not enough regulations. Given that sustainability is ambiguous and not an exact science, the level of sustainability thus depends on what it gets measured and compared to. Thus, this created a more careful approach to green communication.

"When it comes to claiming that we use sustainable agriculture principles, it's difficult because it's still very unclear what's defined as sustainable, hence it's hard to get proof, which we must have to communicate about it." - R14

4.6.2 Technical

As environmental sustainability improvements came from technical improvements, the communication was both impacted by how far gone the product development was and how technically difficult it would be to explain it. Thus, this resulted in a paradox where what is most complex to communicate is often the most significant achievement and vice versa.

“What we communicate around environmental sustainability is affected by the complexity of improved product formulas. But I can barely understand the technical processes, so it’s hard to make appealing consumer claims. I mean, it is too complex for the consumers.” - R1

The ingredients development was one of the main challenges and the respondents excluded efforts concerning this from the communication not to risk being too technical.

“At the moment, the work on improving the formulations and changing from a renewability side is not yet communicated. That is because it’s too early and not well understood by consumers.” - R16

4.6.3 Internal and External Knowledge

Some respondents claimed that proper environmental sustainability communication requires a knowledgeable company, where all employees know what is best for the environment. Thus, low internal knowledge could potentially cause both greenwashing and less green communication.

“I have been careful and sometimes chosen not to communicate a green claim because I don’t understand the technicality behind the sustainable improvement. If we had greater knowledge around it, we would know how to tweak claims to make them more marketable.” - R2

Further, the expected consumer knowledge around sustainability was expressed as a challenge. Even though the Nordic consumer was referred to as quite knowledgeable, some environmental claims were considered too technical or complex to communicate.

“We have done a great job in terms of a process that makes our ingredients more sustainable, but it’s too difficult and technical to explain it to consumers.” - R13

“Palm oil is a tricky topic because we produce it sustainably, but media has judged products containing palm oil are the worst. Hence, consumers act as if they know what’s best, but it’s clear that they are not knowledgeable about this since other alternative oils can be less sustainable. But since explaining our efforts would need a long answer, we rather not say too much to consumers.” - R8

5. Analysis

The following chapter will analyze the empirical findings with the theoretical framework and research presented in the literature review. The outline follows the thesis' research questions, starting with analyzing the drivers for greenhushing (5.1) and thereafter the circumstances for greenhushing (5.2). Lastly, the study's conclusion is presented (5.3).

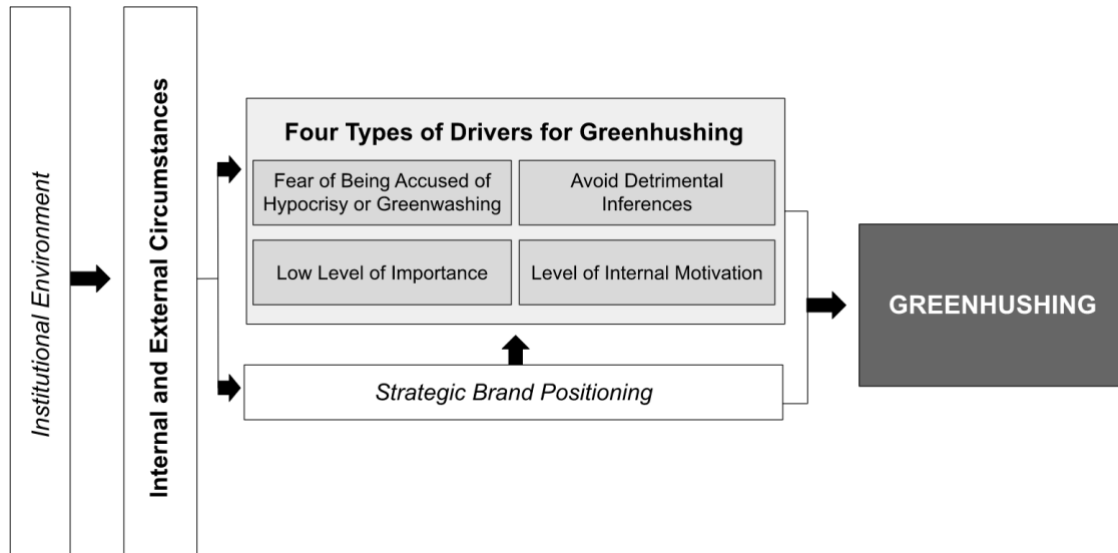


Figure 4 - Theoretical framework for greenhushing

5.1 Drivers for Greenhushing

Regarding the drivers of greenhushing, six different drivers emerged from the empirics. Whereas four of these were in line with previous findings and the theoretical framework (Figure 4), two new drivers emerged from the empirical data.

5.1.1 Fear of Being Accused of Hypocrisy or Greenwashing

The case company deliberately avoided communicating some of its sustainability initiatives due to their fear of being accused of greenwashing, in line with literature (Carlos & Lewis, 2018; Falchi et al., 2022; Ginder et al., 2019; Lyon & Maxwell, 2011; Vallaster et al., 2012). The overflow of sustainability claims has made it hard to be perceived as trustworthy. Thus, the respondents were cautious regarding green communication due to the increased consumer skepticism and monitoring from society (Carlos & Lewis, 2018; Lyon & Montgomery, 2015). Consequently, green claims were withheld or removed to reduce the risk of being perceived as misleading despite that the claims could become a competitive advantage. Furthermore, greenhushing was conducted to avoid public exposure and unwanted opinions coming from sustainability communication as it could easily lead to more badwill than goodwill (Falchi et al., 2022). As expected, this carefulness was related to concerns for their reputation and negative media coverage being a big multinational FMCG company (Lyon & Maxwell, 2011).

Thus, given that one brand's communication is linked to other brands, they had to take a multidimensional perspective for their global brands since the green communication could easily be interpreted differently across markets. This supports previous indications that global brands experiencing an increased fear of negative criticism will lead to greenhushing (Polonsky & Jevons, 2009). Further, the respondents had a careful approach to green communication as they felt more exposed to accusations due to that FMCG companies are often labeled as the culprit and given that they had recently been wrongfully accused of greenwashing, it shows how green communication can backfire despite good intentions (Falchi et al., 2022; Lyon & Maxwell, 2011; Seele & Gatti, 2017).

The respondents emphasized the trade-off between transparency and fear of being questioned when it came to stating the percentage-level in green claims and in line with Falchi et al. (2022), did greenhushing occur if the percentage level was considered too low. Nevertheless, the use of eco-certification was not to the same extent as in previous studies used as an easy maneuver to avoid suspicious consumers (Falchi et al., 2022). Which could be explained by the high Nordic standards to receive the eco-certifications. Hence, the risk of consumers making incorrect inferences was not a concern in contrast to previous findings (Bickart & Ruth, 2012; Delmas & Gergaud, 2021).

While previous research indicated that green communication could challenge a company because it can attract attention to less sustainable areas (Carlos & Lewis, 2018; Falchi et al., 2018), this was not evident in the empirics. This could be explained by the case company's very bulletproof approach to green communication and how they properly and progressively built sustainability into the brand before anything was communicated. Also, given their long history of sustainable development, they had high confidence in their business and operation. However, this rather created a *temporary* greenhushing due to the prolonged research and compliance testing process until a green claim landed in consumer communication. Nevertheless, as most of the brands did not have a green position from the core, the respondents expressed difficulties in convincing consumers of the credibility of new green claims due to high consumer skepticism and less trust in big corporations like FMCGs, supporting Balmer et al. (2013).

The high level of perceived scrutiny in society and high exposure to accusations did not always lead to greenhushing. Even though the respondents felt like they suffered from competitors' greenwashing behavior and extravagant claims (Christensen et al., 2013; Heras-Saizarbitoria et al., 2020), it made them even more willing to do the right thing. For instance, some had instead started to exaggerate the details of what they are claiming. Thus, it could be argued that this driver does not only have downsides, given that more thorough communication to consumers entails a more rightful picture. Accordingly, the fear of being accused of hypocrisy or greenwashing is twofold. While it led to greenhushing as expected in some instances, it can also drive "green" companies to adopt a more rightful, despite careful, approach to green communication.

5.1.2 Low Level of Importance

The empirics implied that some sustainability achievements were unimportant to the consumers and thus disregarded in consumer communication. Even though the respondents did not consider their green efforts as non-events, they neither believed all achievements would generate a substantial benefit for the brand or consumer (Falchi et al., 2022). However, given that most sustainability initiatives were executed globally and only the ones considered important for the local markets were cascaded down. This asymmetry between the global and local teams made some green achievements be ignored in brand communication on a local level. Thus, in line with Falchi et al. (2022), but the findings also expand the explanation by arguing that big companies might suffer more from involuntary greenhushing due to inadequate interaction between disciplines (Petala et al., 2010).

Nevertheless, the respondents did not consider these global initiatives as highly important for their local communication due to a lack of consumer relevance. Hence, consumer interest outweighed the importance of showcasing green achievements, which corresponds with previous findings in the hospitality industry (Coles et al., 2017; Font et al., 2017). It was emphasized that sustainability was not communicated if it did not constitute a point of difference, added value or met key consumers' expectations (Heras-Saizarbitoria et al., 2020; Vallaster et al., 2012). Thus, the respondents expressed a concern that sustainability in itself is no longer a unique selling point and is only considered a hygiene factor. Hence, to consider green communication, the green efforts must be associated with a consumer benefit, or the sustainability achievements must be highly integrated and powerful for the specific brand. Hence, greenhushing can be driven by the importance of having a unique selling point (Kapferer, 2012; Bhat & Reddy, 1998). Additionally, sustainability was not expected to be the primary consumer expectation or purchase driver, e.g., taste, efficacy, price, or other attributes came first. Thus, it was considered more crucial to meet these needs prior to sustainability.

While Falchi et al. (2022) claim that greenhushing occurs when companies fail to realize sustainability as a journey, the findings of this study have been able to expand the reasoning. Since the respondents clearly acknowledged the long journey towards sustainability, the aim of perfection was rather caused by their very conservative approach to not using green claims until it is bulletproof. Also, greenhushing was deemed necessary until they found the right (perfect) way to build greenness into the brand's position.

5.1.3 Level of Internal Motivation

From the literature review, different researchers had concluded different motivations leading to greenhushing. The empirics of this study supported that all three variations of internal motivation for CSR could, in different ways, drive greenhushing. The most emphasized internal motivation for sustainability was based on high altruism. Thus, their confidence in doing the right thing was more valued for themselves and decreased the

need to communicate externally (Falchi et al., 2022). In addition, most of their sustainability initiatives had been more inward-facing and internally driven hence not translated into consumer communication, which corresponds to Graafland et al. (2012).

Nevertheless, others argued that they are a profit-seeking company. Thus, the importance of sales caused greenhushing to occur when sustainability achievements did not lead to a purchase driver, i.e., not generating revenue, which corresponds to findings from the hospitality industry (Coles et al., 2017). However, when sustainability gained more external relevance in the Nordic market, leading to increased consumer demand, the case company shifted its internal sustainability to include it in brand communication not to lose relevancy and create a competitive advantage (Keller et al., 2002). Hence, even though greenhushing was not always the case, it suggests that green communication is still a business choice (Ettinger et al., 2021).

Furthermore, while the respondents mentioned forces coming from several stakeholders, consumers and retailers exerted the strongest force. While both stakeholders demanded sustainability, their pressure for other things was slightly higher, such as traditional attributes from the consumers and sales rotation from the retailers. Hence, the lack of external pressure for sustainability resulted in a lower motivation for green communication (Alblas et al., 2014). However, in contrast to Alblas et al. (2014), the shortcoming pressure did not affect their motivation for sustainability, even though it led to increased focus on traditional marketing parameters to satisfy consumers and retailers, they were confident that their sustainability efforts had a global societal impact. Thus, this indicates that if a company is also altruistically motivated, greenhushing may be conducted but not limit sustainable development.

5.1.4 Avoid Detrimental Inferences

There was an apparent concern that green attributes often came at the expense of other qualities (Dangelico & Vocalelli, 2017; Delmas & Gergaud, 2021). Thus, the respondents avoided communicating about greenness if they believed consumers would make detrimental inferences about the product (Falchi et al., 2022). However, the concern that green claims were less attractive was mainly related to products with functional aspects, such as detergents, cleaning sprays, and deodorants, which correspond with theory (Mai et al., 2017; Newman et al., 2014). The respondents argued that consumers do not believe that, e.g., detergent can be efficient even if it is green because “chemicals are necessary to make it clean”. Further, the Food category was an interesting case, as greenness was mostly perceived to add more quality to the product (Dangelico & Vocalelli, 2017). However, when it came to “vegan”, the respondents expressed concern about potential detrimental inferences. Thus, veganism was downplayed due to the fear of consumer disapproval of the taste (Mai et al., 2017). Hence, greenhushing was conducted to avoid potential detrimental inference as it could impact the purchase decision, but to different

extents depending on the nature of the product and related consumer beliefs about green attributes (Kim & Lyon, 2015).

5.1.5 Low Level of Brand Fit

The first emergent driver for greenhushing appeared when a brand or product had a low fit with environmental sustainability. Thus, when a brand has another purpose and focus, especially within another sustainability pillar, such as social responsibility, green communication becomes secondary since it can shift away from the brand's purpose and create brand confusion (Polonsky & Jevons, 2009). In addition, despite that a brand incorporates greenness to some extent, the findings suggested that a brand can still focus on a set of sustainability questions. Thus, greenhushing is deliberately conducted for the other areas. Given that the case company operated several brands, different sustainability questions were necessary to reduce cannibalization and confusion in the portfolio (Arora & Aribarg, 2008; Keller, 2013).

Furthermore, the respondents argued that when the aim is to be e.g., a premium ice cream brand focusing on pop-culture or a hygiene brand whose purpose is to "kill bacteria", green claims can disrupt the communication's focus. Likewise, the desired position a brand wants to achieve in the minds of consumers (Ries & Trout, 1969). Therefore, despite the sustainability achievements of these brands, greenhushing was conducted not to overshadow what signifies the brand or its products. Moreover, since some brands do not originate from having a green identity, the brand fit becomes even lower since consumers do not naturally associate the brand with greenness (Du et al., 2007; Keller, 2013). Hence greenhushing can occur until a brand finds the resources and strategy to build greenness into a brand and reach the brand fit required to be perceived as credible (Lewis, 2003; Werther & Chandler, 2005). Conclusively, a low level of brand fit with environmental sustainability will drive a brand to conduct greenhushing.

5.1.6 High Level of Sustainability Complexity

The second emergent driver for greenhushing came across when sustainability becomes very complex, thus challenging to communicate or make appealing and understandable messages. However, this depends on the product type and in which areas the company makes its green achievements. This driver was evident for the case company because its achievements in sustainability included very technical developments within e.g., formulations and ingredients. Thus, the respondents argued that these areas are too difficult to explain and poorly understood by consumers. Hence, greenhushing is suggested to increase even more if the external knowledge level is perceived as low because it is pointless to communicate something the target consumer will not understand. Likewise, this will also result if the company's internal knowledge is lacking because if the employees are challenged to understand the initiative or achievement in itself, it will naturally affect how one can adjust the claim to become marketable. The shortcomings in

the case company's internal knowledge could be explained by the potential lack of integration of professionals within environmental sustainability into the marketing department (Petala et al., 2010). Nevertheless, although a high level of sustainability complexity will drive greenhushing behavior, the respondents argued that their substantial work within complex green achievements would continue.

5.2 Circumstances for Greenhushing

The circumstances conducive to greenhushing have been identified and characterized by the following three parts, external circumstances, organizational circumstances and strategic brand positioning circumstances. External circumstances include pressures from non-market actors such as regulators, media and trends, and market-related actors such as the industry, competitors, consumers, market gatekeepers and technical development. The external circumstances create an environment that incentivizes greenhushing behavior while also influencing the other two circumstances. Thus, the organizational circumstances, including size, structure, processes, and culture, and the strategic brand positioning circumstances, including a brand's portfolio, target consumer, competitive advantage and message hierarchy, also mediate and influence the way that a company responds to the external circumstances and affect a company's communication decision. These areas of circumstances are related to the drivers presented in 5.1, as these indirectly affect how the found drivers unfold for a company and thus explains a company's proneness to conduct greenhushing.

5.2.1 External Circumstances

The regulatory context was found to pressure the company to communicate in a certain way (DiMaggio & Powell, 1983; Scott, 1995). Thus, some of the sustainability areas the case company focused on were considered a response to regulatory directions or preparation for future legislation. Such as, when single-use plastic was banned, it influenced the company to focus more on PCR plastic in their communication. Similarly, regulations influence what the media picks up, which affects consumers' expectations, thus pressuring what the company should focus on in their communication (DiMaggio & Powell, 1983). Hence, this suggests that more regulations around green topics could push companies to conduct less greenhushing. On the contrary, the respondents were more inclined to greenhushing behavior when an area was unregulated or not clearly defined, e.g., around sustainable palm oil or agriculture principles. However, the findings did not show an increased shareholder pressure during deregulation (Kim & Lyon, 2015), but rather the pressure coming from media and consumers was more significant. For instance, in an unregulated market with no available guidelines for assessing sustainability claims (Delmas & Burbano, 2011), the respondents argued for increased fear that consumers or media would misinterpret or scrutinize a claim. Such as how the media negatively framed palm oil made it difficult for the case company to communicate their story without losing legitimacy (DiMaggio & Powell, 1983). Thus, the regulatory context indirectly affects

media and consumers assessing the communication, which influences if greenhushing occurs more or less. Since the case company was very mindful of its reputation and thus dependent on media and consumers being able to both influence and punish them, it suggests that coercive pressure stems more from informal and societal expectations than formal ones when it comes to greenhushing (DiMaggio & Powell, 1983).

Accordingly, consumers' demands were highly emphasized as a decisive circumstance for the company's decision around green communication. This confirms that the company acted according to perceived appropriate actions and expectations from consumers (Selznick, 1948). Since the respondents perceived consumer expectation, knowledge and purchase drivers for sustainability as low and feared consumers' negative associations for green attributes for specific products, it made them more prone to conduct greenhushing. Thus, consumers constitute normative pressure as they lead the company to conform to their demands and values (Scott, 1995), suggesting that greenhushing will occur if the perceived consumer demand for greenness is low and vice versa.

Market trends were another dependent circumstance for greenhushing. Given that the case company had conducted even more greenhushing in previous years and partly integrated their sustainability achievement into consumer communication when sustainability became a trend, suggests informal external trends constitute a high normative pressure on the company influencing their behavior (Scott, 1995; Selznick, 1948). Likewise, the company looked at competitors to understand trends and conform to industry standards, such as the prevalent use of eco-certifications could be argued as a normative pressure (Scott, 1995). However, the prioritization of eco-certification also stemmed from being authority biased, thus the company experienced coercive pressure to invest in that area to gain legitimacy (DiMaggio & Powell, 1983; Scott, 1995). Hence, in a market where eco-certifications have become industry standard and gained authority, companies can prioritize eco-certifications and thus be more prone to conduct greenhushing for other green claims.

Moreover, the case company studied their competitors in terms of admiration and condemnation, making them a crucial circumstance for greenhushing. The admiration resulted in mimetic pressure since they undertook green claims that were successful for competitors in the green segment (DiMaggio & Powell, 1983). While this potentially led to less greenhushing, it also resulted in more homogeneous brands using the same claims, which affected one's competitive advantage. Thus, the respondents faced a constant trade-off between choosing efficacy or legitimacy (Yang & Su, 2014). Further, their condemnation against competitors' hypocritical behaviors, greenwashing cases, and themselves being falsely accused of greenwashing had caused a risk-averse behavior and a higher proneness to conduct greenhushing. This could be explained by how the company had made sense of their reality and industry, affecting its predictions about being an easy target for scrutiny (Scott, 1995).

Further, a high dependency on essential market gatekeepers formed a circumstance. The retailers' strict trade windows for when new products could be launched made it challenging to tap into short-term sustainability trends. While this did not directly cause greenhushing, the restriction coercively pressured the company to focus on more safe and long-term suited communications, which could explain an involuntary greenhushing or *temporary* greenhushing due to the long timeframe (DiMaggio & Powell, 1983). Moreover, the retailers expected the market leaders to drive sustainability innovations, while their primary goal was to get products with high sales rotation. This placed the case company in a tricky first-mover situation since new green practices and products will not be quickly adopted or valued in a diffusion phase due to deficient normative forces (Delmas & Montes-Sancho, 2011). Hence, this resulted in less green communication to consumers to drive sales and more to retailers to satisfy their sustainability agenda.

Given that sustainability development often comes from technical development in the production of products, technical development constitutes a circumstance conducive to greenhushing behavior. Thus, how far the technical development has come determines how much can be communicated regarding greenness. Also, since technical achievements were challenging to communicate, the case company deliberately withheld sustainable improvements within complex areas. However, since companies mimic each other during uncertainty, the lack of communication also creates a lack of mimetic behavior necessary to build legitimacy into new green practices (Deephouse, 1999; DiMaggio & Powell, 1983). Thus, when technological development is ambiguous, it will require a first-mover to innovate and others to follow and adopt the same technology to build acceptance (Cyert & March, 1963; March & Olsen, 1976). Consequently, while technical development is an external factor, it also depends on one's internal innovations and communication to make greenhushing less occurring.

5.2.2 Organizational Circumstances

A company's organizational circumstances can explain why greenhushing occurred to different extents. The case company followed a centralized structure, where the global team directed most of the strategies and communication plans to local markets. Hence, whether the local markets communicated about sustainability depended upon the prioritization made by the global team and what initiatives and achievements they determined as important to cascade downstream. Also, the multinational aspect caused green efforts to mainly be executed where they generated the most impact on a global scale, and as most of these efforts were regarded as low relevance for local consumers, it was not considered in brand communication. Thus, operating locally but being dependent on a bigger entity affected potential green communication. Likewise, the asymmetry about not having information about all sustainability achievements by default could explain why greenhushing occurs. Thus, this argues for greenhushing to occur to a greater extent in big corporations, especially for the communication executed on local levels.

Furthermore, the knowledge level varied across the departments, and each had its capabilities in silos. Thus, the respondents working directly with the decision-making for communication experienced that they suffered from insufficient legal, language and technical knowledge. On the one hand, this could be explained by the increased complexity caused by high regulatory variation between local and global and the Nordic countries (Delmas & Burbano, 2011). On the other hand, the lack of interaction between internal departments can explain the constraints of incorporating sustainability as a field spanning across departments (Petala et al., 2010). Consequently, while greenhushing can occur more when the internal knowledge level is deficient within the above aspects, the shortcoming can be explained by the company's structure. On the contrary, this suggests that a smaller company operating in only one market and working more cross-functional might be less prone to greenhushing behavior.

Moreover, the case company's internal processes were inflexible, and many sign-offs were required before any sustainability communication left the company to assure a high level of compliance. While these rigid processes and a high level of carefulness can be argued to inhibit green communication, it remains difficult to determine whether it inhibits greenwashing more. Nevertheless, the company could have developed an overly careful approach given their predictions about operating in an industry highly exposed to scrutiny (as mentioned in chapter 5.2.1). This belief had been internalized into the company since most respondents personally supported a careful approach to green communication (Palthe, 2014), thus making them more prone to greenhushing.

The respondents emphasized that sustainability was in their corporate identity, hence a significant part of their culture, and the CEO personally reinforced many environmental strategies. Thus, this personal conviction for sustainability became a strong normative element in their internal sustainability focus (Strannegård, 2000). Likewise, while external stakeholder pressure made them take responsibility, their sustainability work was primarily internally driven and focused on the environmental breakthroughs they could achieve in society and less if it resulted in consumer communication. Doubtless, was there high personal support for this way of approaching sustainability (Palthe, 2014). Thus, a company that has internalized sustainability into the organizational culture can be more prone to conduct greenhushing.

Nevertheless, the respondents argued that the company aimed to be a role model in their industry and forefront of sustainable development. However, it was perceived as challenging to get new sustainable achievements out to consumers, such as their efforts in sustainable agriculture principles being withheld due to the uncertainties and lack of external proof. Thus, this could be explained by the greater impact institutional pressure exerts on first-movers since a new practice lacks standards and established regulations (Delmas & Montes-Sancho, 2011). Hence, the case company ended up in a paradoxical

situation, where they both were first-movers but still wanted external conformity before communicating. While this study cannot fully determine if being a first-mover causes greenhushing behavior, can the combination of being risk-averse and first-mover increase greenhushing behavior.

5.2.3 Strategic Brand Positioning Circumstances

The last found circumstance conducive to greenhushing was strategic brand positioning. The brands had well-established positions that the respondents always considered before any brand communication (Aaker & Shansby, 1982; Crawford, 1985; Perreault & McCarthy, 1996). Further, their context of being FMCG brands determined the brand's initial frame of reference (Keller, 2013), thus to sell products fast at a relatively low price and meet a broad mainstream target group did not constitute a "green frame". Hence, this constrained the incorporation of sustainability into their brands' position and communication, considering the importance of having a customer-focused value proposition (Kotler, 2003). Similarly, the potential integration for sustainability within a brand's position was affected by the brand's current position (Vallaster et al., 2012). Therefore, greenness was strategically not always added to preserve the established consumer associations they already had established and wished to stay consistent with (Keller, 2013; Keller et al., 2002; Ries & Trout, 1969). Additionally, since CSR engagement goes beyond the environmental aspects, greenhushing was notably conducted for one brand strongly positioned as socially responsible since green claims could jeopardize and harm the successful position. Likewise, a focused CSR position is advocated as stakeholders view it more positively and reduce consumer confusion (Polonsky & Jevons (2009).

Accordingly, the brands' position created a message hierarchy, where the primary message had to be clearly positioned in the minds of the target consumers to build the desired position (Keller et al., 2002; Ries & Trout, 1969). Thus, given that most brands had other more important attributes to communicate prior to sustainability, such as taste, indulgence or efficacy, it can explain why greenhushing occurs. Likewise, the respondents argued that these attributes also refer to main category drivers, thus to be considered by consumers, one must first communicate the attributes and functions the consumers seek in buying the product. Hence, greenhushing can be explained by the importance of considering a brand's POP as it discerns to the consumers what they can expect from the product (Fernandes & Moreira, 2019; Keller, 2016; Keller et al., 2002; Levitt, 1981) and gives the brand credibility in the marketplace (Keller, 2013). While greenness could become a POD, sustainability efforts were no longer considered a unique selling point. Likewise, they had experienced that their first-mover advantage within sustainability had quickly disappeared when competitors followed. Thus, a mimetic behavior resulting in more homogeneous firms (DiMaggio & Powell, 1983) can also explain the brands' challenge to use greenness as a POD. Therefore, given the importance of competitive advantage (Aaker & McLoughlin, 2010; Kotler, 2003), some brands

withheld their green claims until they found the right way to make sustainability a real competitive advantage or consumer benefit. Others relied more on their current established and successful positions (Keller et al., 2002).

In a competitive context, since some of the case company's brands' positions did not extensively rely on their sustainability achievements, being placed lower on the sustainability dimension (Du et al., 2007). Thus, these brands struggled to compete against brands higher up, often pointed out as local green niche brands since these have been positioned as green from the beginning and identified with this in the consumers' minds (Bhattacharya & Sen, 2003; Du et al., 2007; Keller, 2013). The findings indicated that even the brands aiming for green positions and driving new consumer perceptions experienced a challenging journey, e.g., the detergent brand that tried to reposition had lost its core attributes when adding sustainability to its position (Keller et al., 2002). Hence, despite having green products and sustainable achievements, the challenge of repositioning resulted in removing environmental claims to regain consumer relevancy and competitive advantage. This shows how heavy the established position weighs and can thus explain why greenhushing occurs for brands not originally positioned as green.

Moreover, since the brands operated in several markets and were bound to brand portfolios, they had to strategically be positioned concerning other brands to limit confusion for consumers or overlap in the category (Arora & Aribarg, 2008; Keller, 2013). Naturally, to build complementary effects (Keller, 2000), all brands had different roles to play both within and outside the sustainability area to satisfy different consumers. Consequently, greenhushing can occur more when brands operate in a portfolio. Further, the respondents argued that they suffered from being bound to the global brand positioning strategy since these were not always locally relevant (Steenkramp, 2017). However, since the local teams were restricted in adapting the communication, green claims were strategically removed to achieve relevancy and desirability to local consumers (Keller, 2013). Furthermore, since certain global brands were prioritized over local brands for incorporating sustainability into their positions, gives reasons for why greenhushing occurs more for local brands operating in multinational companies. Nevertheless, this prioritization could be explained by the tremendous amounts of work and resources it takes to integrate sustainability into a brand position (Lewis, 2003; Werther & Chandler, 2005). It took decades of internal work for some brands to make sustainability credible and rightfully built into the position and the consumers' minds. Thus, a *temporary* greenhushing could appear due to the long integration processes into a position before reaching consumer communication.

Lastly, even though CSR was truly integrated into the case company's roots, it was still perceived as challenging to reflect it into the brand's positioning, in contrast to previous findings (Polonsky & Jevons, 2009). However, the Food category was argued to have managed to incorporate sustainability most successfully, which could be explained by

how far they had come in market expectations and acceptance. Hence, in the light of institutional theory, the contrasting findings can be explained by the two forces of internal identity and institutional environment influencing the company's ability to build a brand around sustainability and conduct more or less greenhushing (DiMaggio & Powell, 1983; Hoffmann, 2001; Scott, 1995).

5.3 Conclusions

By applying the theoretical framework (Figure 4), it has been possible to derive several explanations regarding drivers and circumstances for greenhushing, expanding the knowledge about why the phenomenon occurs. While the findings suggest that greenhushing is a strategic business decision in most scenarios, it was in some cases an involuntary outcome due to the e.g., industry exposure, organizational setting, resource prioritization, restricted trade windows or lack of knowledge. Also, the long time frame of integrating sustainability into a brand position and compliance processes led to a *temporary* greenhushing since green achievements are made long before they reach communication. The findings highlight that greenhushing is not a set behavior, it can be conducted partly and to various extents within the same company or brand. Further, building on the fact that companies mimic each other, greenhushing could be argued as concerning for the environmental movement since the behavior limits the diffusion of socially desirable activities and the external motivation for environmental CSR. However, since the case company was very altruistically driven for sustainability, their motivation for green efforts remained, suggesting that greenhushing behavior will not to the same extent affect the environmental movement for internally motivated companies, but potentially for externally motivated companies. For the purpose of this study, a useful framework has been developed, which is an extended version of the theoretical framework and integration of the findings in the study that organizes the drivers and circumstances, thus shedding light on why companies conduct greenhushing (see Figure 5).

RQ1: What are the drivers for greenhushing behavior?

The study concluded six different drivers for greenhushing, which in regard to previous literature has four drivers been identified in line with Falchi et al. (2022), (1) Fear of being accused of hypocrisy or greenwashing, (2) Low level of importance, (3) Level of internal motivation and (4) Avoid detrimental inferences. Nevertheless, as the authors revisited these with an expanded theoretical outlook and real-life setting, an improved rationale for these has been developed. For instance, the fear of being accused of greenwashing was found to be twofold, as it had also driven a careful and rightful approach to green communication. Further, the low level of importance was explained to be highly driven by consumer interest. Also, the findings supported that various internal motivations can simultaneously drive a company and that all types can lead to greenhushing behavior. Greenhushing was particularly found to apply to functional or vegan products. However,

since greenness was positively associated with most products in the Food category, there were no detrimental inferences to avoid. Furthermore, by revising the drivers for greenhushing, two new drivers emerged from the empirics: (5) Low level of brand fit and (6) High level of sustainability complexity. While a low level of brand fit was foreseen given the shortcomings in previous literature, thus the incorporation of the theoretical lense of strategic brand positioning, the second emergent driver being a high level of sustainability complexity, did only emerge from the empirics.

RQ2: What are the circumstances conducive to greenhushing and how does these affect a company's proneness to conduct greenhushing behavior?

The circumstances conducive to greenhushing were identified by the following three parts: external circumstances, organizational circumstances and strategic brand positioning circumstances. By understanding the case company's institutional environment and what pressured them into certain actions, along with incorporating the theoretical field of strategic brand positioning, a more advanced characterization of the circumstances was developed, explanations for why greenhushing behavior occurs and what can make a company more or less prone to adopt the behavior.

While a regulated market can be conducive to less greenhushing, and an unregulated market can cause more greenhushing, the informal pressure coming from media, trends and consumers was argued to constitute a higher pressure on the company. Although green trends influenced the company to conduct less greenhushing, mimetic behavior between competitors limited the competitive advantage of green communication, which in turn increased the proneness to conduct greenhushing. Instead, it was deemed necessary to mainly comply with industry standards to gain legitimacy, hence the common use of eco-certification above other green claims. In addition, when a company experience operating in an environment with a higher risk of scrutiny, it can cause risk-averse behavior and thus increase the proneness to conduct greenhushing. Likewise, a risk-averse behavior combined with being a first-mover in sustainability was found to cause greenhushing in a problematic way since first-movers are necessary for the diffusion of new complex sustainability practices and technical development. Further, a market gatekeeper can force a company to comply with them, such as the retailers' strict trade windows and demand for sales rotation explained why greenhushing occurred more. Moreover, when sustainability has been internalized in the corporate culture, it can make a company more prone to greenhushing behavior. Also, the findings suggest that greenhushing occurs to a greater extent in big companies. Thus, in a multinational setting, greenhushing was particularly apparent at the local market level, but also for local brands because global brands were prioritized for integrating sustainability in the brand's positions given the time and resource-demanding process. Nevertheless, a brand's current position and related portfolio and thus perceived synergies with green attributes affect the possibilities and desire to incorporate sustainability in a brand's positioning and

communication. Likewise, when greenness did not constitute a competitive advantage or demand by target consumers, greenhushing was conducted as it was not expected to drive sales or relevance.

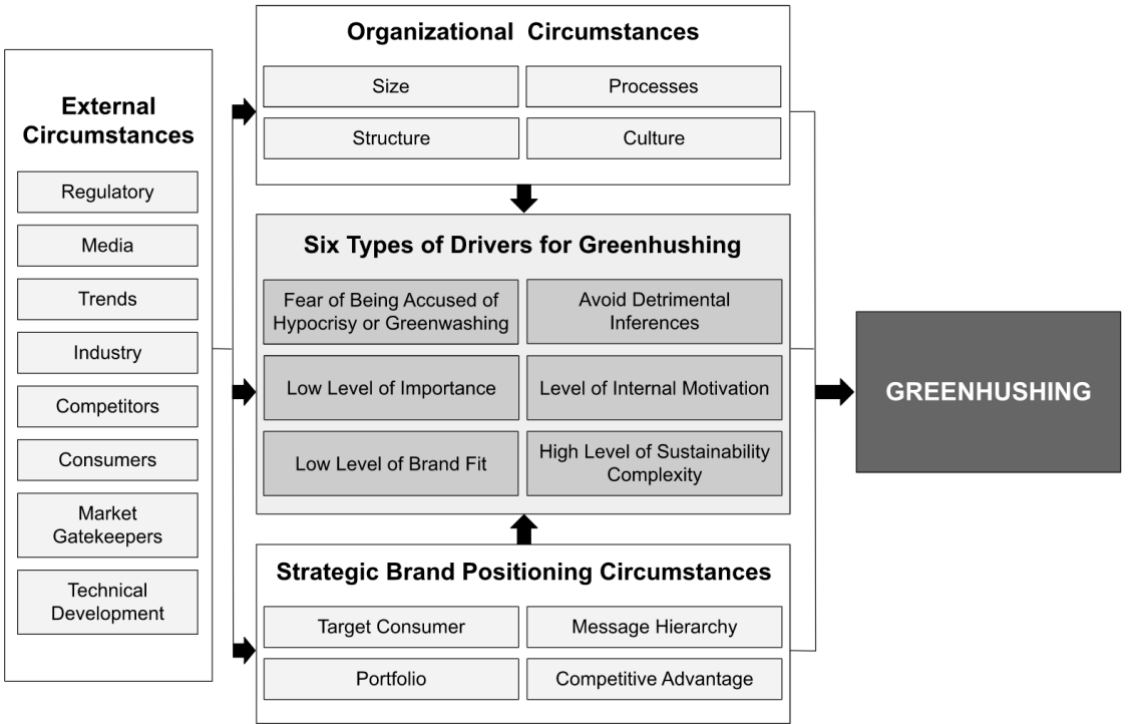


Figure 5 - Drivers and Circumstances for Greenhushing (extended version of theoretical framework)

6. Discussion

The final chapter of this thesis includes the theoretical contributions (7.1), discussion of the practical implications (7.2), the limitations of the study (7.3), and suggestions for future research (7.4).

6.1 Theoretical Contribution

As greenhushing is a nascent research field, more research has been called for. Thus, through a single-case study, this thesis has investigated the research gap for why greenhushing behavior occurs. By combining the three academic fields: greenhushing, strategic brand positioning and institutional theory, which have otherwise been separate, it has been possible to both expand and improve the rationale for previously found drivers for greenhushing, develop two new drivers, and to our knowledge be one of the first that has identified and characterized circumstances conducive to greenhushing in this setting. Hence, utilizing a dimensional perspective has allowed for a more nuanced understanding of why companies conduct greenhushing and what can make a company more or less prone to adopt the behavior. Accordingly, adding the perspective of circumstances, this study has recognized that since a company is bound to specific internal and external circumstances and brand positioning, greenhushing can be an involuntary outcome but was found to be a strategic decision in most situations. Also, the authors have expanded the motives for greenhushing beyond the fear of being accused of greenwashing. While previous research tends to lean the discussion toward greenwashing, this study has efficiently incorporated the strategy perspective, which proved to be essential in explaining why greenhushing occurs. In addition, the study has developed a theoretical framework that later emerged into a useful framework illustrating the circumstances conducive to greenhushing in terms of external, organizational and strategic brand positioning and the six drivers for greenhushing. Thus, this framework contributes to theory as it can be used as a basis for greenhushing studies in the future.

6.2 Practical Implications

The study provides several insights and implications about greenhushing for practitioners. Thus, understanding that greenhushing is a prevailing behavior and why such complex behavior occurs can support managers depending on how they want to approach green communication. As greenhushing behavior impacts how the competitive field and business environment unfolds, this study clarifies why companies in the FMCG industry might conduct more or less greenhushing. The findings give insights on how one can avoid greenhushing, where institutional theory has made it possible to elucidate how a company's behavior affects the market outcome and what must be done if one wants to accelerate green communication. Nevertheless, it should be highlighted that environmental sustainability communication will not strategically suit all brands and companies, implying that greenhushing can be a beneficial strategy for some. Although,

it is recommended that efforts for sustainable development should remain and reasonably be communicated to other stakeholders and practitioners not to limit environmental progress. While the findings mainly apply to other similar FMCG companies, they could potentially be representative for companies that find themselves alike in terms of size, structure and type of operation including several brands. A final implication of studying greenhushing is that it reduces the asymmetry between consumers' views on companies' green actions, which allows consumers to better "vote with their money".

6.3 Limitations of Study

The findings of this thesis contain certain limitations. While the aim was not to achieve transferability, rather depth over breadth, the study used a single-case study method, including one company with several brands and twenty interviews. Thus, the findings will be subject to this context, and the counterpart must judge the transferability to other contexts. Hence, the findings will not be the definitive explanation for why greenhushing occurs. For instance, conducting this study in another setting and with interviewees higher up in the organization could potentially lead to other findings, arguably could the mention of shareholders be more prominent. Nevertheless, when investigating greenhushing for consumer communication in a big company, the respondents were deemed suitable for the purpose of this study. Moreover, given the scope and time frame of the thesis, the findings show a temporal overview since the company's environmental performance and related communication have been treated as fixed, thus recall bias can appear retrospectively. Further, while the anonymization of the study is motivated, it still limits others the possibility of making a replica of the study.

6.4 Future Research

Greenhushing remains nascent in academia, and the authors hope this study can stimulate future research to deepen the knowledge about greenhushing further. Firstly, it would be valuable to conduct a similar qualitative study on a smaller company to compare the results and how greenhushing may appear differently, as indications from this study have highlighted. Likewise, a more extensive study including several types of case companies could have a comparing outlook and thus reach more advanced conclusions for why different situations may be more or less prone to conduct greenhushing. Secondly, to strengthen the findings of this study, a quantitative study could be a relevant complement as it can explore causal relationships between the circumstances and drivers leading to greenhushing. Thirdly, different channels or platforms of communication e.g., social media, packaging, website, or events, are factors that would be appropriate to evaluate in a future study. The authors argue that smaller communication spaces, e.g., small packages, could lead to higher proneness to conduct greenhushing. As a final remark, the authors hope that this study can be a solid starting point for future research within greenhushing.

7. References

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Appendices

Appendix 1: Interview Sample

Respondents	Type of role	Category	Length (min.sec)	Date of interview
Respondent 1	Brand Manager	Home Care	71.01	2022-02-10
Respondent 2	Brand Manager	Home Care	66.07	2022-02-11
Respondent 3	Category Chief	Home Care	53.50	2022-02-11
Respondent 4	Brand Manager	Ice Cream/Foods	57.07	2022-03-01
Respondent 5	Brand Manager	Beauty and Personal Care	48.40	2022-03-01
Respondent 6	Brand Manager	Ice Cream	71.22	2022-03-02
Respondent 7	Brand Manager	Home Care	69.12	2022-03-02
Respondent 8	Brand Manager	Foods	54.39	2022-03-02
Respondent 9	R&D	Ice Cream	66.38	2022-03-02
Respondent 10	Brand Manager	Beauty and Personal Care	48.00	2022-03-03
Respondent 11	Category Chief	Beauty and Personal Care	42.40	2022-03-03
Respondent 12	Brand Manager	Foods	51.18	2022-03-04
Respondent 13	R&D	Beauty and Personal Care	42.28	2022-03-04
Respondent 14	R&D	Foods	47.50	2022-03-08
Respondent 15	Category Chief	Foods	55.14	2022-03-08
Respondent 16	R&D	Home Care	41.35	2022-03-08
Respondent 17	Brand Manager	Ice Cream	46.03	2022-03-10
Respondent 18	Category Chief	Ice Cream	42.42	2022-03-15
Respondent 19	Brand Manager	Home Care	52.07	2022-03-15
Respondent 20	Brand Manager	Beauty and Personal Care	46.45	2022-03-16

Appendix 2: Interview Guide

Background information

- Name/Role/Category/Brand?
- What would you say are the main consumer drivers in your category and for your brand?

General environmental sustainability communication

- Can you explain how [Case Company] / your category works with environmental sustainability?
- Based on this, what do you choose to communicate to consumers?
- Is there anything that is excluded in the communication?

Importance

- Are you aware of all the environmental sustainability initiatives that are done for your category or brands?
- How important do you think it is that [Case Company] communicates environmental sustainability through its brands?
- What determines what you choose to communicate in terms of environmental sustainability?
- Based on this, how does it affect the way environmental sustainability is communicated?

Motivation

- What would you say is the reason why [Case Company] works with environmental sustainability?
- How environmentally sustainable would you say [Case Company] and its brands are?
- Based on this, how does it affect the way environmental sustainability is communicated?

Detrimental inferences

- Is there a perception that a product's environmentally sustainable characteristics come at the expense of its core characteristics?
- Is there a difference depending on brand or product type?
- Based on this, how does it affect the way environmental sustainability is communicated?

Avoiding scrutiny

- Do you perceive the greenwashing phenomenon to be relevant for your decision-making?
- In which way do you consider greenwashing when it comes to communicating environmental sustainability initiatives?
- Depending on the degree to which a product/initiative is environmentally sustainable, does that affect the communication?
- Do you consider the consumer/market to be ready for environmentally sustainable products within your category?
- Do you see a challenge with launching and communicating an environmentally sustainable product in an existing product portfolio that is not as environmentally sustainable?

Positioning

- How are the brands you are managing positioned in the market?

- How do you think consumers react to environmental sustainability communication?
- How does the brand's positioning affect its environmental sustainability communication?
- How is the environmental sustainability communication affected by how a brand is positioned relative to competitors?

Circumstances

- What kind of circumstances would you say affect the degree of environmental sustainability communication?

Outro:

- Is there anything you would like to add?

Appendix 3: Thematic Analysis

