
| **RESEARCH ARTICLE**

A Critical Review of Consumer Trust and Brand Authenticity in ESG-Focused Marketing Communications

Dr R.K.M Lankanath

DBA, MBA, MSc, BBA(sp), Attorney-at-Law, ICASL, Sri Lanka

Corresponding Author: Dr R.K.M Lankanath, **E-mail:** lankanathrkm@yahoo.com

| **ABSTRACT**

In the contemporary marketing landscape, the integration of Environmental, Social, and Governance (ESG) principles has transitioned from a niche differentiator to a mainstream corporate imperative. However, this proliferation of ESG-focused marketing communications has been paralleled by a significant challenge: rising consumer skepticism and the pervasive threat of greenwashing. This paper provides a critical review of the complex interplay between these communications, the cultivation of consumer trust, and the perception of brand authenticity. It posits a conceptual framework wherein substantive ESG actions, aligned with stakeholder expectations, form the foundational prerequisite for authenticity. This authenticity is then communicated through radical transparency and stakeholder engagement, which in turn fosters the consumer trust essential for long-term brand loyalty. The review identifies the various forms of greenwashing—from claim-materiality mismatches to selective disclosure—as critical barriers that sever this chain by creating perceptions of corporate hypocrisy and undermining attributions of sincere motive. The findings underscore that in an era of heightened scrutiny, the efficacy of ESG marketing is contingent not on persuasive communication alone, but on the verifiable alignment of corporate actions, communications, and core values. This synthesis has profound implications for marketing theory, urging a deeper integration of legitimacy and commitment-trust theories, and for practice, advocating for a strategic shift from telling a sustainable story to demonstrably being a sustainable enterprise.

| **KEYWORDS**

ESG Marketing Communications, Consumer Trust, Brand Authenticity, Greenwashing, Corporate Legitimacy, Stakeholder Engagement, Sustainability Communication

| **ARTICLE INFORMATION**

ACCEPTED: 09 November 2025

PUBLISHED: 27 December 2025

DOI: 10.61424/rjbe.v3.i4.632

1. Introduction - The ESG Imperative and the Trust Deficit

The contemporary marketing environment is also becoming characterized by the concept of embedding the Environmental, Social, and Governance (ESG) factors in the core brand positioning and consumer communications as a more comprehensive corporate reaction to ethical conduct requirements imposed by stakeholders (Freeman, 1984; Carroll, 1991). This change is parallel to the emergence of the conscious consumer, who is a values-conscious but highly discerning person who questions corporate assertions and ascribes motives, who is naturally skeptical (Klein and Dawar, 2004). This is a skepticism that is nurtured by the issue of greenwashing that is so widespread in the market - the spread of false or overstated sustainability assertions (Delmas & Burbano, 2011; Lyon & Montgomery, 2015). The resultant effect is the lack of trust, which is critical and in which real ESG efforts are compromised, and consumers lose trust (Wagner, Lutz, and Weitz, 2009). The purpose of writing this article is to critically analyze the complex connection among ESG-oriented marketing communications, consumer trust, and

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brand authenticity. These main concepts will be broken down into parts in the following sections, and the greenwashing spectrum will be analyzed and a structure will be suggested on how to create legitimacy and trust by engaging in authentic activities.

2. Literature Review: Deconstructing Key Concepts

2.1 The Evolution and Dimensions of ESG Marketing

2.1.1 From Niche to Mainstream

ESG marketing is conceptually based on the development of the corporate social responsibility (Carroll, 1991) and stakeholder theory (Freeman, 1984), which claim that companies are responsible towards a wide group of stakeholders. Firstly, as niche green marketing, this has been developed to be a multi-stakeholder, all-encompassing strategy. Nowadays, Environmental, Social, and Governance factors are being integrated into the core business strategies rather than being surface-level campaigns to fulfill the requirements of the institutional and consumer legitimacy of the business operations (Suchman, 1995; Lyon and Montgomery, 2015).

2.1.2 The Three Pillars of Communication.

This is translated into unique pillars of messaging in marketing communications. The pillar of the environment is conveyed in statements about carbon neutrality, waste minimization, and biodiversity. The social pillar focuses on diversity, equity, inclusion, community involvement, and labor practices. The governance pillar is not as consumer-facing but is indicated by the promises of ethical sourcing, board diversity, and transparency, which become important credibility backstops of the environmental and social assertions (Marquis, Toffel, and Zhou, 2016).

2.2 The Sensitivity of Consumer Confidence to the ESG.

2.2.1 Trust as a Multi-dimensional Construct.

Consumer trust is a complex and fragile concept in the ESG context. Based on the relationship marketing theory, the concept of trust would be credibility (ability to deliver on promises of ESG), integrity (truthfulness and compliance with moral standards), and benevolence (true interest in stakeholder well-being) (Morgan and Hunt 1994; Swaen and Chumpitaz 2008). Any breakdown of any of the dimensions, such as a demonstrated ability to deliver high-quality products and not being honest about claims in the supply chain, will destroy total trust (Chen, 2010).

2.2.2.1 The Effect of Perceived Motive.

The weakness of such trust is acutely linked to the feeling by the consumer that there is a corporate motive. Trust and positive assessment ensue upon consumers relating ESG efforts to intrinsic, value-oriented motives. On the other hand, the actions, which are seen as extrinsic, profit-oriented, and instrumental, instigate scepticism and hypocrisy accusations and undermine trust and brand equity in a severely negative way (Klein and Dawar, 2004; Wagner, Lutz, and Weitz, 2009).

2.4 The Brand Authenticity as the Answer to Cynicism.

2.3.1 Authenticity: Ranging beyond Being Real.

Brand authenticity is therefore proposed to be the remedy to this cynicism. It is not simply described as the existence of a brand as being true to itself, stable in its actions, and true to what it says it is, in both the short and long term, even where it becomes inconvenient (Napoli et al., 2014; Beverland, 2005).

2.3.2 The Place of Narrative and Congruence.

This image is developed within an absolute consistency of internal substantive ESG behaviors of a brand and external communications. This alignment is interwoven with a logical and plausible brand story that gives meaning and warrants the brand to exist beyond profit, hence cultivating strong consumer relationships (Beverland, 2005; Gilmore and Pine, 2007).

3. The Greenwashing Spectrum: A Critical Barrier to Trust

3.1 Conceptualizing Greenwashing in ESG

3.1.1 Beyond Environmental Claims

This concept of greenwashing should be further developed as not only environmental lies but also its social and governance equivalents. Social washing is done in the form of performative activities, like superficial campaigns on diversity that do not have substantive policies of inclusion, whereas governance washing is done through masking bad practices in their supply chains in a veil of policy utterances (Lyon & Montgomery, 2015). This triple bottom line is a tactical yet deceptive answer to multi-word stakeholder demands of holistic ESG performance (Marquis, Toffel, and Zhou, 2016).

3.1.2 The Driver of Greenwashing

These practices are mainly motivated by strong extrinsic forces, such as investors insisting on adherence to ESG, the necessity to be at a certain competitive level, and the desire to obtain organizational legitimacy (Suchman, 1995; Delmas and Burbano, 2011). In situations where the substantive action cost is seen to be high, companies can avoid substantive action by using symbolic communication, i.e., they do not tie their public statements to the actual work practices that they engage in to cope with the perceptions.

3.2 B Typology of ESG Greenwashing.

There exists a typology of typical tactics of greenwashing, which exposes the processes by which trust is compromised, as highlighted in Table 1.

3.2.1 Claim-Materiality Mismatch

This is whereby one magnifies a little positive feature, like small packaging, to distract from a much bigger negative effect, like a huge carbon footprint due to logistics. This fallacy takes advantage of the fact that the consumer lacks the context of the full amount of material impact of the company (Parguel, Benoît-Moreau, and Larceneux, 2011).

3.2.2 Symbolic and Substantive Actions.

In this case, brands participate in superficial, high-profile projects, one charity event, or a special-edition product, without incorporating ESG values into their business model, research and development, or business presence. It is a gesture rather than a substantive undertaking (Lyon and Montgomery, 2015).

3.2.3 Unspecified and Inexplicable Language.

This is a strategy based on such wide, emotional, and uplifting words as "eco-conscious," "green," or "resolute to social justice," which have no details and no quantifiable or verifiable data. This form of language generates a positive relationship with no definite and responsible statements (Delmas & Burbano, 2011).

3.2.4 The Trade-Off Omission

This happens when one firm publicizes a good ESG feature whilst secretly continuing a more harmful practice in some other aspect of its value chain, such as advertising a product as being produced using recycled materials in the process of using suppliers who have negative labor rights (Marquis, Toffel, and Zhou, 2016).

Table 3.1: A Typology of Greenwashing in ESG Communications

Type of Greenwashing	Core Mechanism	Example
Claim-Materiality Mismatch	Emphasizing a minor positive issue to distract from a major negative one.	Promoting a product's recyclable bottle while the company is a top plastic polluter.
Symbolic vs. Substantive Actions	Deploying tokenistic initiatives instead of core operational integration.	Launching a high-profile diversity council while having no diverse senior executives.
Vague & Unverifiable Language	Using broad, unquantifiable terms that cannot be proven false.	Claiming a product is "all-natural" or "designed for well-being" without evidence.
The Trade-Off Omission	Highlighting one positive attribute to conceal a significant negative one.	Marketing "ethical" coffee while using suppliers known for deforestation.

3.3 The Erosive Impact on Trust and Authenticity

All of these greenwashing strategies affect the consumer's belief and trust in the brand in a significantly corrosive fashion. All the strategies target the fundamental aspects of trust: they are disintegrating perceived benevolence (pointing out profit motives), they are disabling perceived integrity (lack of integrity), and they may even undermine competence (poor supply chain management) (Morgan and Hunt, 1994). This gives an impression of corporate hypocrisy where the activities of a brand are not congruent with its communications (Wagner, Lutz, and Weitz, 2009). The eventual result is a disastrous loss of brand genuineness, which leads to cynicism on the part of the consumer, loss of brand reputation, and breakdown of the consumer-brand bond (Napoli et al., 2014).

4. A Conceptual Framework for Building Trust through Authentic ESG Communication

4.1 The Foundation: Substantive ESG Integration

4.1.1 Alignment with Core Business Model

A substantive incorporation of the principles into the core business model and business operations of the company that goes beyond the realm of a marginal marketing activity lies in the bedrock of authentic ESG communication. This entails that ESG goals are integrated into the product design, supply chain, and corporate governance, and show a real match of both economic and social accountability as envisaged on the pyramid of Carroll (1991). Another indication that ESG is an imperative as opposed to a communicative afterthought is an indication of a real commitment, which is the foundation of credible narratives (Beverland, 2005).

4.1.2 Long-Term Investment in Short-Term Campaigns.

Authenticity is also developed with a proven, long-term pursuit of ESG objectives, which is progressive and not marketable in a short period of time. This long-term research and development investment or systemic alteration is a stark contrast to short-term and campaign-driven projects. This persistence is an indicator of an inherent value-oriented motive, which consumers understand as an important aspect of a brand with its authentic nature and a solid foundation on which they can trust (Klein and Dawar, 2004; Napoli et al., 2014).

4.2 The Communication Strategy: Transparency and Proof.

The assertions that have empirical evidence are verifiable and data-driven.

ESG performance communication should be based on verifiable and supported claims that are based on data. This includes leaving the ambiguous language behind in favor of clear and measurable indicators, like a 30 percent cut in carbon emissions or a 40 percent share of female representation in leadership, but supported by third-party audits and certification. These are the physical evidence needed to develop consumer trust in the competence and honesty of a brand, which directly refutes the methods of greenwashing (Delmas and Burbano, 2011; Parguel, Benoit-Moreau, and Larceneux, 2011).

4.2.2 Accepting Radical Transparency.

Radical transparency, as a means of communicating, is, perhaps, the most potent one, as it implies the dissemination of not only the success stories but also the obstacles, failures, and unmet objectives. Admitting weaknesses and having a clear way of how one can improve makes one appear more truthful and well-intentioned, and will turn weaknesses into strong points. This is in order to suppress the view of corporate hypocrisy as an effort to show a steady and humbling commitment to the process, and not only the destination (Wagner, Lutz, and Weitz, 2009; Morsing and Schultz, 2006).

Telling the story with substance is a skill that I have cultivated over the past two years and plan to enhance further ahead.

Lastly, this should be incorporated into a great story. Substantial storytelling relates the data to human change so that the ESG journey of the brand can be viewed in an emotionally engaging manner. Nevertheless, this story should not lose sight of the real activities and quantifiable effects of the brand, and instead, the story should be used to help clarify the reality and not to replace the reality, thereby developing a realistic and authentic brand (Beverland, 2005; Gilmore and Pine, 2007).

4.3 The Stakeholder Engagement Role.

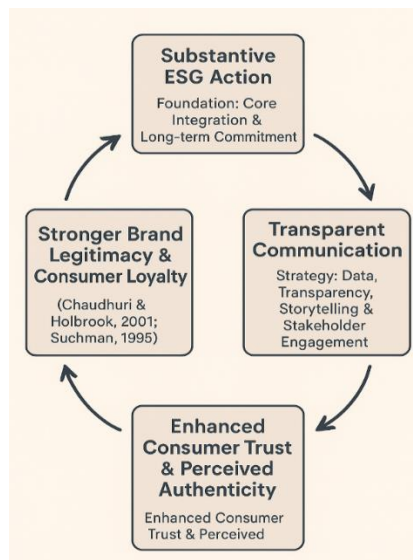
4.3.1 Co-creation and Dialogue

True communication is not dialogue but a conversation. Engaging consumers and communities in ESG activities, such as co-creation workshops, feedback loops, and joint projects, catapult them out of the passive recipient group to active co-creators. This process is based on participation, which is based on the stakeholder theory (Freeman, 1984); a sense of shared purpose is developed, and trust is enhanced through the process as the promises of a brand are made visible and confirmed by the community the brand serves (Morsing & Schultz, 2006).

4.3.2.1 Finding the Employee Advocacy.

Employees are the most plausible communicators of authentic ESG. Employees are also potent, trusted ambassadors when they are sincerely interested and involved in the ESG practices of their company and able to talk about them firsthand. Their organic campaigning offers an internal confirmation of external assertions that gives a degree of confirmation that no company campaign can imitate and greatly enhances the perceived genuineness of the brand (Beverland, 2005).

Figure 4.4: The Cyclical Relationship between Authentic ESG Action, Communication, and Consumer Trust



5. Discussion: Navigating the Challenges and Future Pathways

5.1 The Tension Between Commercial and Ethical Imperatives

One of the main issues regarding the implementation of the proposed framework is the natural conflict between commercial imperatives in the short term and long-term ethical commitments. True ESG incorporation can be very costly and may not go well with the conventional shareholder demands of maximization of quarterly earnings (Carroll, 1991). This is the final challenge to brands, which requires leadership that focuses on creating sustainable value rather than temporary market benefits and thus reclaims the meaning of the corporation itself.

5.2 The Changing Regulatory Environment.

The growing problem of greenwashing is driving an emerging strong regulatory reaction, such as the European Union Green Claims Directive. The rules are increasingly requiring a greater level of evidence supporting environmental claims that require lifecycle assessment and evidence-based claims (Lyon & Montgomery, 2015). This changing environment balances the level of the playing field of the truly sustainable brands and punishes the shallow communicators, which strengthens the strategy of substantive action over false communication (Marquis, Toffel, and Zhou, 2016).

5.3 The Informed Consumer as a Critical Being.

Finally, the consumer may be the most potent enforcement mechanism due to his or her rising awareness and online empowerment. With information and places to act together, the consumers and the activist groups are now powerful external auditors (Morsing & Schultz, 2006). This relationship renders brand authenticity, which is exhibited by coherent action and radical transparency, not only an ethical decision but also an inherent strategy to achieve long-term legitimacy and consumer loyalty (Napoli et al., 2014; Suchman, 1995).

6. Conclusion

This critical analysis has determined that in the sphere of ESG-oriented marketing, consumer trust development is inevitably reliant on perceived brand authenticity. This weak authenticity is systematically eroded by all the types of greenwashing, as they diminish a sense of trust by creating discrepancies between what companies claim and what they do. The suggested framework emphasizes the fact that the way to restore trust lies in less advanced rhetoric and more straightforward and provable adherence to corporate actions, communications, and values. Finally, the results drive an ultimate mandate that brands must shift their focus from narrating a sustainable story to the more challenging aspect of being a genuinely sustainable business in order to be credible and effective in ESG marketing.

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