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Unmasking corporate hypocrisy: Review of washing practices, drivers, and societal outcomes

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Abstract

This systematic literature review critically examines the phenomenon of corporate hypocrisy, defined as the divergence between stated corporate social responsibility commitments and actual organizational practices. The review comprehensively analyzes various manifestations of corporate washing—including greenwashing, bluewashing, pinkwashing, woke washing, and social washing—and explores their underlying drivers through the lenses of institutional theory, legitimacy theory, and stakeholder theory. Furthermore, the paper systematically investigates the multifaceted negative outcomes of corporate hypocrisy on society and the economy, such as the erosion of consumer trust, market distortion, misallocation of sustainable investments, and the impediment of genuine social and environmental progress. The discussion also addresses methodological challenges in measuring corporate hypocrisy and highlights the evolving regulatory landscape. Finally, this review identifies critical gaps in the existing literature and proposes future research pathways, emphasizing the need for longitudinal studies, cross-cultural comparisons, and the development of advanced, AI-driven detection mechanisms for corporate washing practices.

Keywords: corporate hypocrisy, greenwashing, social washing, systematic literature review, institutional theory, legitimacy theory, stakeholder theory, market distortion, ESG.

1. Introduction

In recent decades, the paradigm of corporate social responsibility (CSR) has evolved from a peripheral concern to a central pillar of corporate strategy, driven by increasing societal expectations for organizations to address pressing global challenges such as climate change, environmental degradation, and social inequality (Kasradze & Streimikiene, 2025; Kudirkaite, 2025). This heightened expectation, however, has inadvertently fostered the pervasive phenomenon of corporate hypocrisy, characterized by a significant discrepancy between a firm's espoused moral or ethical commitments and its actual operational behaviors (Carroll, 1999; Wagner et al., 2009).

As stakeholders—including consumers, investors, and regulators—demand greater accountability and transparency, many corporations have strategically employed superficial or deceptive communication tactics to project an image of

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responsibility without necessarily undertaking substantive internal changes. This practice, broadly termed “corporate washing,” has diversified into various forms, each targeting specific social or environmental issues. While greenwashing, involving misleading claims about environmental performance, remains the most recognized form, the spectrum has expanded to include bluewashing (misusing association with the United Nations), pinkwashing (exploiting LGBTQ+ rights or breast cancer awareness), woke washing (co-opting progressive social movements), and broader social washing (making false claims about labor and human rights practices) (Hawkins, 2012; ESG Analytics, 2022). Furthermore, an emerging trend, “greenhushing,” where companies deliberately under-report genuine sustainability efforts to avoid scrutiny, adds another layer of complexity to this landscape (Font et al., 2017).

This systematic literature review aims to provide a comprehensive and critical analysis of corporate hypocrisy and its diverse manifestations. The primary objectives of this study are the following: (1) to systematically review the literature on the various forms of corporate washing, including emerging trends; (2) to analyze the theoretical drivers, encompassing institutional pressures, the pursuit of organizational legitimacy, and market incentives, that compel organizations to engage in hypocritical behaviors; (3) to evaluate the negative societal and economic outcomes resulting from these practices, providing empirical evidence where available; and (4) to identify critical gaps in the current literature and propose robust future research pathways, particularly in the context of advanced detection mechanisms and internal governance. By addressing these objectives, this paper contributes significantly to the broader discourse on business ethics, sustainability, and corporate governance, offering a nuanced perspective on the persistent gap between corporate rhetoric and reality.

2. Methodology

To ensure a comprehensive and transparent synthesis of the existing literature, this study adopted a systematic literature review (SLR) approach, guided by the Preferred Reporting Items for Systematic Reviews and Meta-Analyses (PRISMA) framework (Page et al., 2021). The SLR methodology allows for the objective identification, selection, and critical appraisal of relevant research, minimizing bias and providing a reliable foundation for theoretical development.

2.1. Search strategy and database selection

A comprehensive literature search was conducted across three major academic databases: Web of Science (WoS), Scopus, and EBSCOhost (Business Source Ultimate). These databases were selected due to their extensive coverage of peer-reviewed literature in the fields of business, management, ethics, and sustainability. The search was performed in February 2026, covering articles published between January 2010 and December 2025. This timeframe was chosen to capture the significant evolution of CSR discourse and the emergence of newer forms of corporate

washing, such as woke washing and pinkwashing, which have gained prominence in the last decade.

The search string was constructed based on the combination of keywords related to the core concepts of the study. The primary search query was: ("corporate hypocrisy" OR "organizational hypocrisy") AND ("greenwashing" OR "bluewashing" OR "pinkwashing" OR "woke washing" OR "social washing" OR "CSR washing") AND ("drivers" OR "consequences" OR "outcomes" OR "impact"). The search was applied to the title, abstract, and keyword fields of the articles.

2.2. Inclusion and exclusion criteria

To ensure the relevance and quality of the selected literature, specific inclusion and exclusion criteria were established.

Inclusion Criteria: Peer-reviewed journal articles written in English; Empirical studies (quantitative, qualitative, or mixed methods) and robust theoretical/conceptual papers; Articles that explicitly focus on corporate hypocrisy or at least one specific form of corporate washing (green, blue, pink, woke, social); Studies that investigate the drivers, manifestations, or consequences (societal or economic) of these practices.

Exclusion Criteria: Non-peer-reviewed materials, including book chapters, conference proceedings, editorials, and working papers; Articles where corporate hypocrisy or washing is only mentioned tangentially without being a central focus of the analysis; Studies focused solely on individual (consumer) hypocrisy rather than organizational behavior.

2.3. Study Selection and Data Extraction

The initial search yielded a total of 845 records across the three databases (see Figure 1). After removing 212 duplicates using reference management software, 633 unique articles remained in the list. The titles and abstracts of these articles were analysed against the inclusion and exclusion criteria, resulting in the exclusion of 415 articles that lacked relevance. The full texts of the remaining 218 articles were then assessed for eligibility. During this phase, 94 articles were excluded due to insufficient focus on the drivers or consequences of corporate washing, or poor methodological representation. The final sample consisted of 124 articles that met all criteria and were included in the systematic literature review presented in this study.

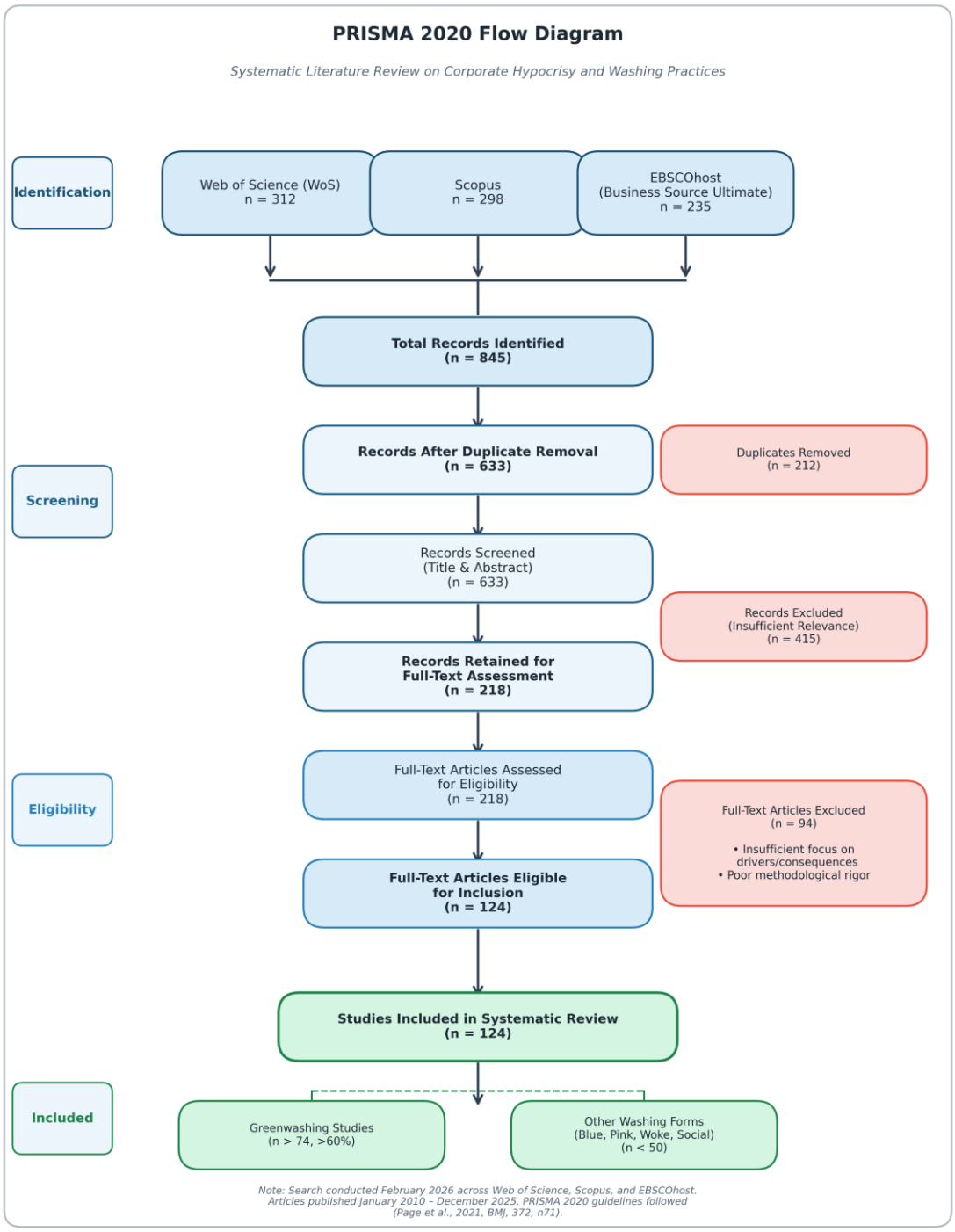


Fig. 1. PRISMA 2020 flow diagram for the systematic literature review on corporate hypocrisy and washing practices.

Data extraction was performed using a standardized coding form. For each included article, the following information was extracted: author(s), year of publication, journal, geographical focus, research methodology, theoretical

framework, specific form(s) of washing studied, identified drivers, and reported consequences.

3. Literature review: forms of corporate hypocrisy

Corporate hypocrisy is fundamentally rooted in the concept of decoupling, where organizations separate their formal structures or stated policies from their actual day-to-day activities (Chao et al., 2015). This decoupling allows firms to maintain legitimacy in the eyes of external stakeholders while continuing business-as-usual practices internally. In Figure 2, forms of corporate hypocrisy are given.



Fig. 2. Forms of corporate hypocrisy.
Source: authors' own elaboration based on (Chao et al., 2015; Hawkins, 2012; Lyon, Montgomery, 2015; Lubitow, Davis, 2011; Berliner, Prakash, 2015; Vredenburg et al., 2020).

3.1. Causewashing

Causewashing refers to a form of corporate hypocrisy in which a company publicly aligns itself with a social, humanitarian, or charitable cause — such as poverty relief, disaster response, or community development — without making any genuine, substantive commitment to that cause (Hawkins, 2012). The corporation leverages the moral credibility and emotional resonance of the cause purely as a reputational and marketing instrument, creating the appearance of social responsibility while its core business practices, supply chains, or governance structures remain unchanged or even actively contradict the values it claims to champion. Unlike greenwashing, which targets environmental concerns, or pinkwashing, which exploits identity-based causes, causewashing operates across a broad spectrum of philanthropic and humanitarian domains, making it particularly difficult to detect and challenge. The result is a form of symbolic compliance — the firm captures the reputational benefits of association with a worthy cause while bearing none of the operational costs or transformational commitments that genuine engagement would require, thereby diverting public attention, donor trust, and consumer goodwill away from organisations that are authentically pursuing the same cause.

3.2. Greenwashing

Greenwashing is the practice of disseminating misleading or unsubstantiated information to present an environmentally responsible public image (Lyon, Montgomery, 2015). It is the most extensively studied form of corporate hypocrisy, accounting for over 60% of the articles in our sample. Tactics include using vague terminology (e.g., “eco-friendly” or “natural”), highlighting a single environmental attribute while ignoring broader negative impacts, or making claims that cannot be verified (Hawkins, 2012). The energy, automotive, and fast-fashion sectors are frequently cited as primary offenders, often using greenwashing to mask the substantial ecological footprint of their core operations. Recent literature has also highlighted the phenomenon of “greenhushing,” where companies deliberately under-report their genuine sustainability efforts to avoid the intense scrutiny and potential accusations of greenwashing (Font et al., 2017).

3.3. Bluewashing

Bluewashing refers to the practice wherein companies align themselves with the United Nations (UN)—often through the UN Global Compact (UNGC)—to enhance their reputation and deflect attention from controversial business practices (ESG Analytics, 2022). By adopting the UN’s blue color and associating with its humanitarian and environmental goals, corporations can project an image of global responsibility. However, because the UNGC relies heavily on voluntary compliance without stringent enforcement or auditing mechanisms, it provides an avenue for firms to engage in bluewashing without making substantive changes to their operations (Berliner, Prakash, 2015). Empirical studies indicate that some companies

use UNGC membership as a symbolic shield while continuing to violate labor or environmental standards in their supply chains.

3.4. Pinkwashing

Pinkwashing initially emerged in the context of breast cancer awareness, where companies used the pink ribbon symbol to promote products that sometimes contained carcinogenic ingredients (Lubitow, Davis, 2011). More recently, the term has been adapted to describe the exploitation of LGBTQ+ rights. In this context, corporations publicly support Pride events or use rainbow-themed marketing to appeal to progressive consumers, while simultaneously failing to implement inclusive workplace policies or, in some cases, financially supporting political entities that oppose LGBTQ+ rights (Thrivability Matters, 2025). The literature emphasizes that pinkwashing often backfires when consumers perceive the brand's activism as inauthentic or purely profit-driven.

3.5. Woke washing

Woke washing is a relatively new phenomenon where brands co-opt progressive social movements and political activism for commercial gain (Vredenburg et al., 2020). Companies engage in woke washing by aligning their marketing campaigns with issues such as racial justice, gender equality, or gun control, without demonstrating a genuine commitment to these causes within their organizational structures or supply chains. This form of hypocrisy capitalizes on the growing trend of consumer activism, particularly among younger demographics (Millennials and Gen Z), but often results in superficial engagement rather than meaningful social impact. Studies show that woke washing can lead to severe brand backlash when the disconnect between the message and corporate practice is exposed (Ahmad et al., 2023).

3.6. Social washing

Social washing is a broader category that encompasses false or exaggerated claims regarding a company's commitment to labor rights, human rights, diversity, equity, and inclusion, and community well-being (ESG Analytics, 2022). It is particularly prevalent in industries with complex global supply chains, such as mining, agriculture, and manufacturing. Companies may highlight philanthropic initiatives or community projects to obscure systemic issues like poor working conditions, child labor, or the displacement of indigenous communities. The literature notes that social washing is often harder to detect than greenwashing due to the qualitative and subjective nature of social impact metrics (RepRisk, 2023).

4. Drivers of corporate hypocrisy

Understanding why organizations engage in corporate hypocrisy requires an examination of the underlying drivers. The reviewed literature predominantly

analyzes these drivers through the lenses of institutional theory, legitimacy theory, and stakeholder theory. Figure 3 presents the comprehensive conceptual framework linking these drivers to the manifestations and subsequent negative outcomes.

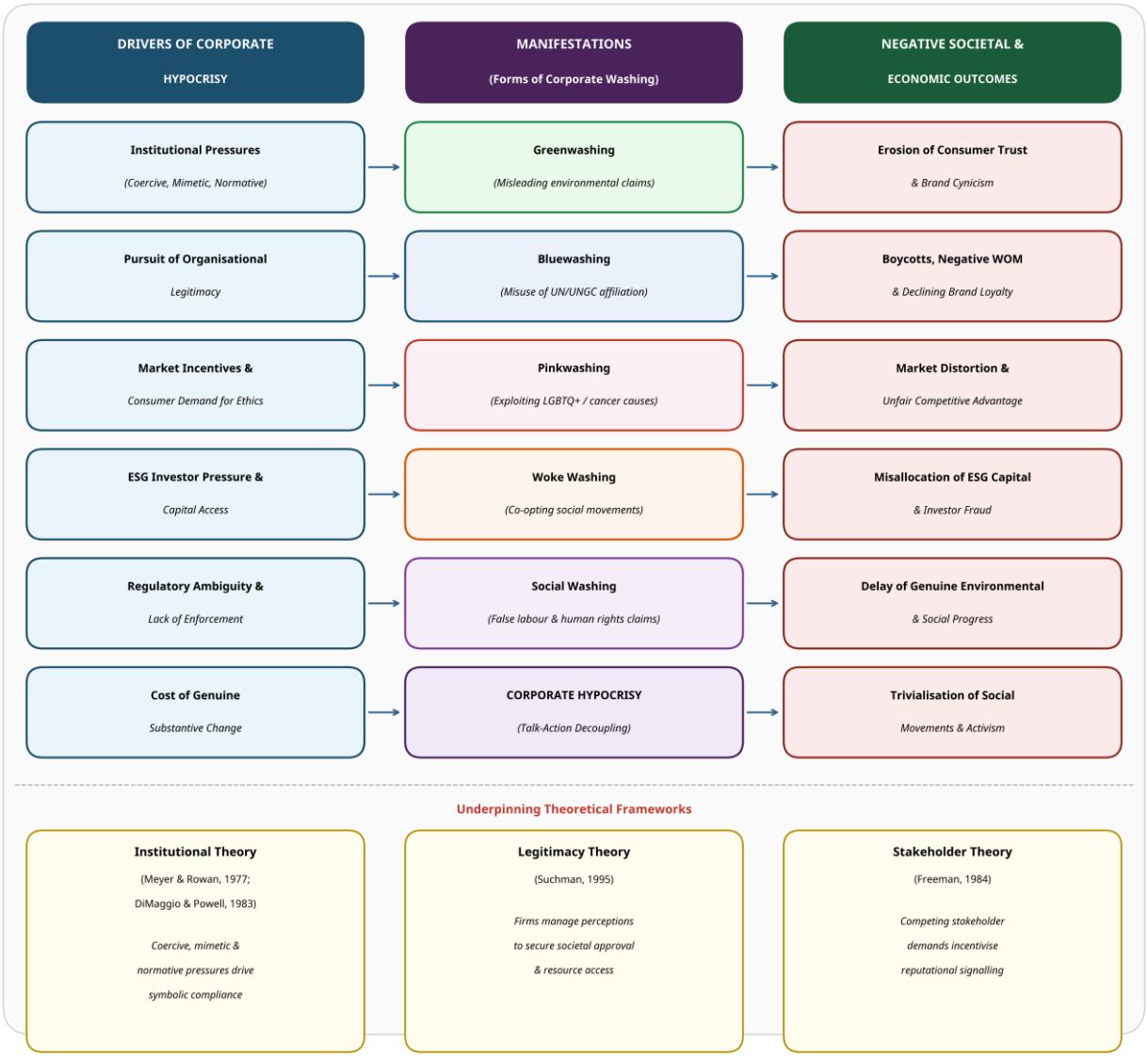


Fig. 3. Conceptual framework of corporate hypocrisy.
Source: authors' own elaboration based on (Meyer & Rowan, 1997; DiMaggio, Powell, 1983; Freeman, 1984; Suchman, 1995).

4.1. Institutional pressures and legitimacy theory

Institutional theory posits that organizations conform to the rules, norms, and beliefs of their institutional environment to gain legitimacy and ensure survival (Meyer, Rowan, 1977). As societal expectations regarding sustainability and social

responsibility have intensified, companies face immense coercive, mimetic, and normative pressures to demonstrate compliance. Legitimacy theory further explains that organizations seek to ensure their operations are perceived as congruent with the bounds and norms of society (Suchman, 1995).

However, implementing genuine, systemic changes is often costly, complex, and disruptive to established business models. Consequently, firms may engage in organized hypocrisy—creating a facade of compliance through communication and symbolic actions while maintaining core operations unchanged (Cho et al., 2015). This allows them to secure legitimacy, appease powerful stakeholders, and access resources without bearing the full costs of substantive transformation. The literature suggests that in highly regulated or heavily scrutinized industries, the pressure to appear legitimate often drives the decoupling of talk and action.

4.2. Market incentives and stakeholder theory

Stakeholder theory emphasizes the need for managers to balance the competing interests of various groups, including shareholders, consumers, employees, and the community (Freeman, 1984). The rise of the conscious consumer has created strong market incentives for companies to project an ethical image. Studies indicate that a significant portion of consumers prefer to purchase from and work for companies that align with their values (Pope, Wæraas, 2016).

This shift in consumer behavior has transformed CSR from a moral obligation into a competitive advantage. In the pursuit of market share, brand loyalty, and premium pricing, companies may be tempted to exaggerate their social and environmental credentials. The potential for short-term financial gain often outweighs the perceived risk of being exposed as hypocritical. Furthermore, pressure from investors for strong Environmental, Social, and Governance (ESG) performance can drive companies to manipulate their sustainability reporting to secure capital investment (Li et al., 2026).

4.3. Regulatory ambiguity and lack of enforcement

The absence of stringent, standardized regulations governing CSR claims facilitates corporate hypocrisy. While some jurisdictions, such as the European Union with its Green Claims Directive, have introduced guidelines to curb greenwashing, the global regulatory landscape remains fragmented and often relies on voluntary reporting frameworks (European Commission, 2024). This ambiguity allows companies to exploit loopholes, use vague terminology, and selectively disclose information without facing significant legal repercussions. The lack of robust verification mechanisms and independent auditing further emboldens firms to engage in deceptive communication strategies, knowing that the likelihood of penalization is relatively low.

5. Negative outcomes of corporate hypocrisy on society and the economy

The consequences of corporate hypocrisy extend far beyond reputational damage to individual firms; they have profound negative impacts on society and the economy. The systematic review identified three primary categories of negative outcomes.

5.1. Erosion of consumer trust and brand reputation

One of the most immediate and frequently cited consequences of corporate hypocrisy is the erosion of consumer trust. When consumers discover that a company's ethical claims are false or exaggerated, it leads to skepticism, cynicism, and feelings of betrayal (Zhigang et al., 2020). This breakdown in trust damages the specific brand, leading to boycotts, negative word-of-mouth, and a decline in customer loyalty and purchase intentions (DeJong et al., 2017).

More alarmingly, the literature highlights a spillover effect: high-profile cases of greenwashing or woke washing cause consumers to become suspicious of all CSR claims, including those made by genuinely responsible companies. This generalized skepticism undermines the effectiveness of CSR as a tool for positive social change and makes it increasingly difficult for authentic brands to differentiate themselves in the market.

5.2. Market distortion and misallocation of capital

Corporate hypocrisy distorts the market by creating an uneven playing field. Companies that engage in greenwashing or social washing can gain an unfair competitive advantage over firms that invest heavily in genuine sustainability initiatives, as the hypocritical firms reap the reputational benefits without incurring the associated costs (Ioannou et al., 2022).

Furthermore, in the financial sector, deceptive ESG reporting misleads investors. This results in the misallocation of capital, where funds intended for sustainable investments are diverted to companies that merely project an illusion of responsibility. This not only defrauds investors who are seeking to align their portfolios with their values but also deprives genuinely sustainable enterprises of the capital needed to scale their operations and drive real-world impact.

5.3. Undermining genuine social and environmental progress

Perhaps the most severe consequence of corporate hypocrisy is its detrimental impact on actual social and environmental progress. By promoting false solutions and creating a facade of action, washing practices distract from the urgent need for systemic change (Hawkins, 2012). For instance, greenwashing can delay the implementation of necessary environmental regulations, as policymakers and the public may be lulled into a false sense of security, believing that the corporate sector is adequately addressing the climate crisis voluntarily.

Similarly, woke washing and pinkwashing can trivialize important social movements. By reducing complex struggles for racial equality or LGBTQ+ rights to

mere marketing slogans, corporations commodify activism and strip it of its transformative power (Vredenburg et al., 2020). This superficial engagement fails to address the root causes of social injustice and can even perpetuate the status quo by masking ongoing discriminatory practices within the corporate structure.

6. Discussion

The synthesis of the literature reveals that corporate hypocrisy is a multifaceted and highly adaptive phenomenon. As societal expectations evolve, so too do the forms of corporate washing. The transition from traditional greenwashing to more nuanced forms like woke washing and social washing demonstrates the corporate sector's agility in co-opting emerging social values for commercial gain.

The theoretical frameworks of institutional and legitimacy theory provide a robust explanation for why this occurs: organizations are fundamentally driven to survive and thrive within their institutional environments, and when the cost of genuine compliance is deemed too high, decoupling becomes a rational, albeit unethical, strategic choice.

However, the literature also highlights significant methodological challenges in studying corporate hypocrisy. Measuring the gap between "talk" and "action" is inherently difficult, particularly for social washing, where metrics are less standardized than in environmental reporting (RepRisk, 2023). Many studies rely on content analysis of sustainability reports or consumer perception surveys, which may not fully capture the objective reality of corporate practices.

Addressing the pervasive issue of corporate hypocrisy requires a multi-faceted approach. The literature increasingly points to the necessity of moving beyond voluntary frameworks toward mandatory, standardized ESG reporting with rigorous, independent third-party auditing (European Commission, 2024). Regulatory initiatives, such as the EU's Corporate Sustainability Reporting Directive (CSRD), represent a step in the right direction, but global harmonization is required to prevent regulatory arbitrage.

Based on the gaps identified in the systematic literature review, several pathways for future research are proposed:

- Longitudinal studies on the evolution of washing practices should be initiated as most of current research is cross-sectional. Future studies should employ longitudinal designs to track how a single firm's washing strategies evolve over time in response to changing regulations and societal pressures.
- Cross-cultural and institutional comparisons are crucial for further studies on corporate hypocrisy. Most current empirical studies focus on Western, developed economies. There is a critical need for research exploring how corporate hypocrisy manifests in emerging markets and how different institutional contexts (e.g., varying levels of press freedom and regulatory stringency) influence the prevalence and forms of washing.
- Advanced detection mechanisms should be developed, as corporate communication becomes more sophisticated, the traditional content analysis may

be insufficient. Future research should explore the application of Artificial Intelligence (AI), machine learning, and natural language processing (NLP) to detect subtle linguistic patterns and discrepancies in large volumes of corporate disclosures.

- The emerging trend of greenhushing—where companies deliberately under-report their genuine sustainability efforts to avoid scrutiny—requires deeper investigation. Research should explore the drivers of greenhushing, its prevalence across sectors, and its implications for market transparency, investor decision-making, and the overall transition to a sustainable economy. Understanding this form of silent hypocrisy is crucial for developing effective countermeasures.
- While much research focuses on external pressures and stakeholder perceptions, more studies are needed to understand the internal decision-making processes that lead to corporate hypocrisy. Investigating the role of corporate governance structures, board composition, executive compensation mechanisms, and organizational culture in driving or mitigating washing practices is a promising avenue. This includes exploring how ethical leadership and internal accountability systems can foster genuine CSR.
- Very important is do assess the role of social media in corporate hypocrisy, therefore, future research should explicitly address the dual role of social media in both facilitating corporate hypocrisy (through rapid dissemination of superficial claims and targeted marketing) and exposing it (through stakeholder activism, citizen journalism, and "cancel culture"). This dynamic interplay significantly shapes the perception and impact of corporate washing.
    - Investigation of sector-specific nuances of corporate hypocrisy is very important future research path, for example the investigation how corporate hypocrisy manifests differently across various sectors (e.g., the fossil fuel industry, fast-fashion, technology, finance). Each industry has unique pressures, regulatory environments, and stakeholder expectations that could lead to distinct forms and drivers of washing practices.

7. Conclusions

This systematic literature review provides a comprehensive synthesis of corporate hypocrisy manifestations, demonstrating that it is not merely an incidental organizational failure but a structurally embedded phenomenon within contemporary market economies. As evidenced across the reviewed studies, the proliferation of various "washing" practices—cause, green, blue, pink, woke, social, and greenhushing—reflects firms' strategic responses to increasing societal, regulatory, and market pressures. Rather than fully internalizing sustainability and ethical principles, many organizations engage in symbolic compliance, decoupling communication from actual practices to maintain legitimacy while minimizing transformation costs.

This study integrates findings from institutional, legitimacy, and stakeholder theories into a unified explanatory framework. This synthesis highlights that

corporate hypocrisy is driven by the complex interplay between external pressures (e.g., institutional demands, market incentives, regulatory ambiguity) and internal cost–benefit considerations (e.g., governance structures, executive incentives). Firms operate in environments where reputational gains from appearing responsible are immediate and tangible, while the costs of genuine transformation are long-term and uncertain. Consequently, hypocrisy emerges as a rational—though ethically problematic—strategic choice. This insight advances the literature by shifting the perspective from viewing corporate hypocrisy as purely deviant behavior to understanding it as a systemic outcome of current governance and market structures.

The study shows that the consequences of corporate hypocrisy extend far beyond individual firms, producing significant negative externalities at the societal and economic levels. The erosion of consumer trust, distortion of competitive markets, and misallocation of sustainable investments collectively undermine the effectiveness of CSR and ESG frameworks. More critically, corporate hypocrisy delays meaningful progress toward addressing global challenges such as climate change, social inequality, and human rights violations. By creating an illusion of action, washing practices reduce the urgency for both regulatory intervention and corporate transformation.

This review also highlights the dynamic and adaptive nature of corporate hypocrisy. As public awareness and regulatory scrutiny increase, firms continuously evolve their strategies—from overt greenwashing to more subtle practices such as woke washing and greenhushing. This evolution suggests that static regulatory approaches may be insufficient. Instead, there is a need for adaptive governance mechanisms that combine mandatory disclosure standards, independent verification, and advanced analytical tools capable of detecting inconsistencies in corporate communication and behavior.

From a policy and managerial perspective, the study underscores the necessity of strengthening institutional frameworks. Policymakers should prioritize the harmonization of ESG reporting standards at the international level and enforce stricter penalties for misleading claims. Simultaneously, organizations must move beyond symbolic CSR toward embedding sustainability into core business models, governance structures, and performance metrics. Failure to do so risks not only reputational damage but also long-term loss of stakeholder trust and legitimacy.

Finally, the study identifies critical research gaps and emphasizes the need for methodological innovation in this field. Future research should adopt longitudinal and multi-method approaches to better capture the evolving nature of corporate hypocrisy and its long-term impacts. Additionally, interdisciplinary perspectives—integrating insights from behavioral economics, data science, and political economy—can further enhance understanding of how and why these practices persist. Therefore, corporate hypocrisy represents a fundamental challenge to the credibility and effectiveness of modern sustainability efforts. Addressing it requires coordinated action across academia, industry, and policy domains. Only through increased transparency, accountability, and methodological rigor can the gap between

corporate rhetoric and reality be narrowed, thereby restoring trust and enabling genuine progress toward sustainable and ethical business practices.

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