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Sustainability Communication as A Strategic Driver: Insights from a Systematic Literature Review

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Abstract: This systematic literature review (SLR) examines the growing field of sustainability communication, highlighting its importance in raising awareness and translating sustainability policies into practical applications. The study aims to consolidate existing evidence, identify key themes, and disclose research gaps that hinder the integration of communication strategies in sustainability initiatives. A structured search was conducted in Scopus and Web of Science, resulting in 229 records (215 from Scopus and 14 from WoS). After removing duplicates, 224 unique articles published between 2019 and 2024 were systematically screened and analyzed. The findings uncover a sustained increase in scholarly interest, marking sustainability communication as a distinct and growing area within sustainability studies. Thematic analysis identifies three primary clusters influencing this field: policy translation and alignment, communication tools and media, and institutional or organizational challenges. Most studies employ qualitative methodologies, while quantitative and mixed-methods research are less common. Overall, the results underscore communication as a crucial yet underexplored mechanism for bridging the gap between sustainability policy frameworks and their practical implementation. The review concludes by stressing the need for more empirical and interdisciplinary research to assess communication effectiveness in various contexts. These insights provide valuable implications for researchers, policymakers, and practitioners seeking to enhance sustainability engagement and drive meaningful institutional change.

Keywords: sustainability communication, green communication, policy translation, systematic review, institutional challenges.

Introduction

Sustainability has emerged as one of the defining global challenges of the twenty-first century. Issues such as climate change, biodiversity loss, and environmental degradation have prompted governments, corporations, and higher education institutions (HEIs) to align their strategies with the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). Although sustainability policies have become increasingly ambitious, their success depends largely on effective communication. Without clear and consistent communication, sustainability efforts risk remaining symbolic rather than transformative, as information gaps may hinder public understanding and institutional action.

Sustainability communication refers to the strategic process of informing, engaging, and motivating stakeholders to adopt sustainable behaviours. Within HEIs, it extends beyond

policy dissemination to encompass the integration of sustainability values into curricula, institutional governance, workplace culture, and operational practices. HEIs are often viewed as “laboratories of sustainability,” capable of shaping both local communities and national development (Lozano et al., 2019). However, many institutions face challenges in translating their sustainability commitments into practice because of fragmented or inconsistent communication strategies. The effectiveness of sustainability communication is influenced by message framing, communication channels, and cultural relevance. Studies indicate that how messages are framed can shape stakeholder engagement and behavioural responses (Dagiliūtė et al., 2020), while the growth of digital platforms has enhanced outreach, especially among younger audiences (Caeiro et al., 2022).

At the same time, sustainability communication faces growing challenges such as greenwashing, which involves misleading sustainability claims, and greenhushing, which refers to the under-communication of achievements that reduce transparency and trust (Haigh & Liszka, 2024). Moreover, communication practices are highly context specific. Chan (2021) demonstrates that cultural attitudes, social hierarchies, and institutional norms influence the delivery and reception of sustainability messages. Global surveys by GlobeScan (2023) also show uneven SDG awareness across regions, with higher engagement in several Asian countries but notable gaps in nations such as Malaysia. These findings highlight the need for communication strategies that are sensitive to cultural and institutional contexts rather than relying solely on universal or top-down approaches.

Despite increasing scholarly attention, sustainability communication research remains fragmented. Existing studies often focus on subfields such as environmental reporting, education for sustainable development, or media framing, rather than adopting an integrative perspective. Methodologically, qualitative approaches dominate the field, while quantitative and mixed-methods studies remain limited, restricting generalizability. Furthermore, research within HEIs tends to prioritize students and academic staff while overlooking administrative personnel who play a crucial role in policy implementation. This systematic literature review (SLR) addresses these gaps by synthesizing 224 studies published between 2019 and 2024 from Scopus and Web of Science databases. The review aims to map the evolution of sustainability communication research, identify its thematic clusters, explore emerging challenges, and propose future directions. By emphasizing the intersections between digital communication, cultural sensitivity, and staff engagement, this paper positions sustainability communication as a strategic catalyst for awareness, institutional transformation, and societal change.

Literature Review

Sustainability communication has developed into a distinct field within environmental communication, organizational communication, and sustainability studies. Initially, it was limited to environmental campaigns, public information initiatives, and corporate social responsibility (CSR) reporting. However, in the past decade, scholars have expanded this definition, asserting that sustainability communication encompasses the processes by which individuals, institutions, and societies negotiate meanings, responsibilities, and actions related to sustainability.

Sustainability communication encompasses the strategies and practices designed to inform, engage, and influence stakeholders in adopting sustainable actions. Within higher education institutions (HEIs), it extends beyond policy announcements to the embedding of sustainability values within curricula, institutional governance, and workplace culture. Universities are often regarded as “laboratories of sustainability” (Lozano et al., 2015) due to their potential to foster environmental and social transformation. Nevertheless, many institutions struggle to translate sustainability commitments into tangible outcomes because of

fragmented or inconsistent communication strategies. Although the concept has gained scholarly attention, there remains no universally accepted definition. Some researchers equate it with green or environmental communication, whereas others emphasise its multidimensional nature encompassing economic, social, cultural, and institutional dimensions. This conceptual ambiguity reflects the richness of the field but also complicates its operationalisation in empirical research.

The literature on sustainability communication is supported by several theoretical perspectives, including the Theory of Planned Behaviour (Ajzen, 1991), Stakeholder Theory, Framing Theory, and the Diffusion of Innovations (Rogers, 2003). These frameworks explain how communication influences sustainability outcomes not only by transferring knowledge but also by shaping attitudes, perceptions, and social norms. However, many empirical studies remain descriptive and lack explicit theoretical grounding, which creates a gap between conceptual development and methodological application.

Globally, research in sustainability communication displays significant variation across regions. In Europe, studies have focused on institutional integration and sustainability reporting, while in Asia, cultural and hierarchical factors play a crucial role in determining message framing and audience engagement (Chan, 2021). Global surveys such as GlobeScan (2023) reveal uneven awareness of the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), with relatively higher engagement across parts of Asia but continuing gaps in countries such as Malaysia. Communication tools and media have also diversified, shifting from traditional channels such as posters and workshops to digital platforms, social media, and participatory mechanisms (Caeiro et al., 2022; Luque-Alcaraz, 2024). Nonetheless, challenges such as greenwashing, greenhushing, and the erosion of digital credibility persist (Haigh & Liszka, 2024).

Despite notable progress, several gaps remain evident within the literature. Sustainability communication research continues to be dominated by qualitative case studies, with limited use of quantitative or mixed methods approaches. Terminological inconsistencies and geographical imbalances also restrict the field's generalisability, as studies from Southeast Asia, Africa, and Latin America remain comparatively scarce. Moreover, existing research in HEIs tends to prioritise students and academic staff while neglecting administrative personnel who play a crucial role in implementing sustainability policies. This systematic literature review (SLR) seeks to address these limitations by synthesising findings from 224 studies published between 2019 and 2024 to map the evolution of sustainability communication research, identify its key themes and challenges, and outline future directions. In doing so, this study positions sustainability communication as a strategic enabler of awareness, institutional transformation, and sustainable societal advancement.

Methodology

This study employed the Preferred Reporting Items for Systematic Reviews and Meta-Analyses (PRISMA) framework to ensure methodological transparency, replicability, and rigour throughout the review process. PRISMA provides a structured and standardised approach for identifying, screening, and selecting relevant studies while documenting the flow of records at each stage. The review followed four phases: identification, screening, eligibility, and inclusion.

3.1 Identification

Relevant literature was identified using two major academic databases, Scopus and Web of Science (WoS), both recognised for their comprehensive coverage of peer-reviewed research. The search strategy employed a combination of keywords, Boolean operators, and truncation techniques to maximise retrieval. The primary search terms were “sustainability

communication” OR “green communication,” applied to titles, abstracts, and keywords. Filters were set for publication years (2019–2024), journal articles, English language, and final publication status. The search yielded 215 records from Scopus and 14 from WoS, producing a total of 229 records.

3.2 Screening

Duplicate records were removed by cross-checking titles, publication years, and DOIs. A total of five duplicates were identified and excluded, resulting in 224 unique articles. The remaining records were screened by reviewing titles and abstracts against predefined inclusion and exclusion criteria to ensure relevance and scholarly quality.

3.3 Eligibility

Full-text versions of the 224 articles were retrieved and assessed for scope and relevance. Studies were excluded if they lacked full-text access, demonstrated weak relevance to sustainability communication, or fell outside the conceptual boundaries of the review. After this process, all 224 studies were confirmed as eligible and included in the final synthesis.

3.4 Data Abstraction and Analysis

A data extraction matrix was developed in Microsoft Excel to record essential information, including authorship, publication year, country, methodology, thematic focus, and main findings. Owing to the diversity of study designs, an integrative synthesis approach was adopted to identify cross-cutting themes, methodological patterns, and emerging research directions. This approach was suitable for accommodating the heterogeneity of the dataset.

3.5 PRISMA Flow Diagram

The overall process is summarised in Figure 1, which illustrates each stage of the review. As shown, 229 records were initially identified, five duplicates were removed, and 224 unique records were screened, assessed for eligibility, and included in the final synthesis.

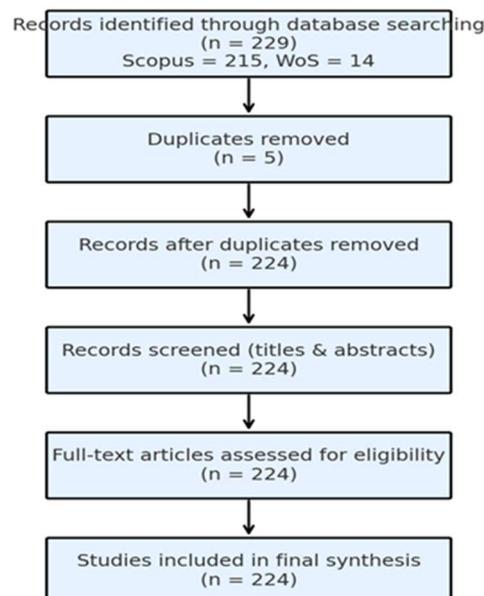


Figure 1. PRISMA Flow Diagram

Source: Adapted from Moher et al. (2009), The PRISMA Statement, PLoS Medicine.

The Findings

This section presents the results of the systematic review in accordance with the Preferred Reporting Items for Systematic Reviews and Meta-Analyses (PRISMA) framework. A total of 224 studies published between 2019 and 2024 were analysed. The data are organised by annual distribution, methodological approach, and thematic clusters.

4.1 Annual Distribution of Publications

The analysis shows a consistent upward trend in publications. The yearly distribution is as follows: 17 (2019), 19 (2020), 40 (2021), 37 (2022), 46 (2023), and 65 (2024). This growth indicates the increasing recognition of sustainability communication as an academic field. The rise in 2021 coincided with the COVID-19 pandemic, which heightened global awareness of the importance of communication in promoting sustainable practices. The annual distribution is illustrated in Figure 2.

4.2 Methodological Distribution

A review of the methodologies used revealed a dominance of qualitative approaches. Approximately 45 per cent of the studies adopted qualitative designs such as case studies and descriptive surveys; 30 per cent employed quantitative methods; 15 per cent used mixed methods; and 10 per cent were conceptual or theoretical in nature. This methodological pattern suggests that the field remains in an exploratory phase, with limited application of advanced quantitative analyses. Table 1 summarises the methodological distribution of the reviewed studies.

Table 1. Methodological Distribution of Studies

Methodological Approach	Percentage of Studies
Qualitative (case studies, descriptive surveys)	45 %
Quantitative	30 %
Mixed methods	15 %
Conceptual or theoretical	10 %

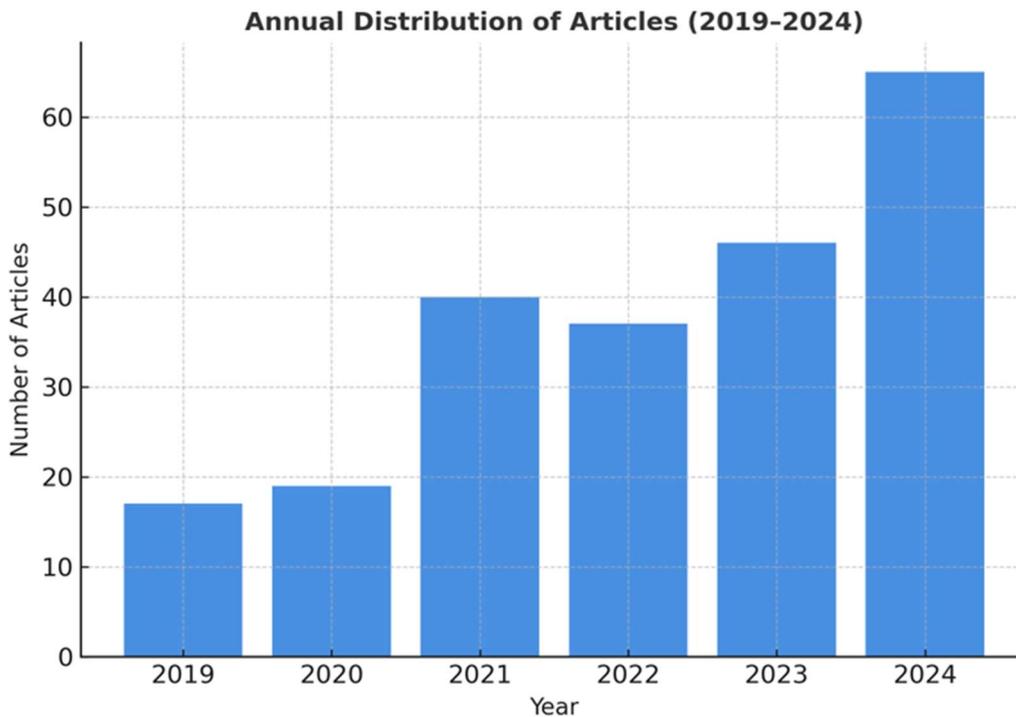


Figure 2. Annual Distribution of Articles (2019-2024)

4.3 Thematic Clusters

The integrative synthesis produced three main clusters of research themes.

Cluster 1 – Policy Implementation and Alignment

This cluster emphasises the importance of communication in facilitating policy implementation and strengthening institutional commitment to sustainability. Studies highlighted that effective communication ensures that sustainability policies are not merely symbolic but are translated into tangible action. Lozano et al. (2015) observed that embedding communication within institutional strategy enhances policy legitimacy, while Dagiliūtė et al. (2020) demonstrated that the success of policy initiatives depends greatly on message visibility, clarity, and stakeholder engagement. Together, these studies reveal that policy communication acts as a bridge between institutional intent and practical execution.

Cluster 2 – Communication Tools and Media

The second cluster focuses on the channels and tools employed to convey sustainability messages. Research underscores the role of digital platforms, social media, and participatory strategies in promoting stakeholder engagement and awareness. Caeiro et al. (2022) demonstrated that social media platforms can effectively reach and mobilise younger generations, enhancing inclusivity and visibility of sustainability initiatives. However, Haigh and Liszka (2024) cautioned that the misuse of such media through practices like greenwashing or greenhushing threatens organisational credibility. This cluster therefore highlights both the opportunities and the ethical challenges associated with digital communication in sustainability contexts. Haigh and Liszka (2024) warned of credibility risks arising from greenwashing and greenhushing.

Cluster 3 – Institutional Challenges and Gaps

The final cluster identifies persistent institutional barriers that limit the effectiveness of sustainability communication. Studies revealed the absence of targeted communication strategies for administrative staff, inconsistent messaging across departments, and cultural factors that hinder open dialogue. Chan (2021) illustrated that cultural norms within higher education institutions shape how sustainability messages are interpreted and delivered, influencing both engagement and behavioural outcomes. Collectively, these findings indicate that institutional culture and internal communication dynamics are critical determinants of sustainability awareness and policy implementation success. As summarized in Table 2, the three clusters collectively illustrate how sustainability communication operates across policy, media, and institutional dimensions. Each cluster reveals distinctive drivers and barriers influencing communication effectiveness within higher education and broader organizational contexts.

Table 2. Summary of Thematic Clusters in Sustainability Communication Research (2019–2024)

Cluster	Focus / Description	Sample Studies	Common Keywords / Themes
Cluster 1 – Policy Implementation and Alignment	Examines how communication supports the translation and alignment of sustainability policies with institutional practices, strengthening commitment and accountability.	Lozano et al. (2015); Dagiliūtė et al. (2020)	Policy communication, alignment, implementation, institutional commitment, engagement
Cluster 2 – Communication Tools and Media	Explores digital and participatory communication channels such as social media and online platforms that enhance stakeholder interaction and visibility.	Caeiro et al. (2022); Haigh & Liszka (2024)	Digital engagement, participatory media, greenwashing, transparency, awareness
Cluster 3 – Institutional Challenges and Gaps	Identifies organizational, cultural, and structural barriers that limit communication effectiveness and staff participation in sustainability initiatives.	Chan (2021); Lozano et al. (2019)	Institutional culture, internal communication, administrative involvement, behavior, awareness gaps

Discussion

The findings confirm the steady growth of sustainability communication research, establishing it as a distinct and expanding field. Effective communication is shown to be essential for achieving institutional and societal sustainability goals. Aligning communication with policy frameworks enhances visibility and accountability, yet many initiatives remain largely symbolic. While digital platforms offer wider engagement opportunities, they also raise credibility concerns when transparency is lacking. The limited focus on administrative staff represents a key research and practice gap, particularly in developing contexts where their role is crucial for implementation. Overall, sustainability communication is evolving toward

interdisciplinary integration, requiring greater methodological diversity, transparency, and outcome evaluation to advance both theory and practice.

Conclusion

This systematic literature review synthesised 224 studies on sustainability communication published between 2019 and 2024, confirming that the field has emerged as an independent and rapidly developing area of scholarly inquiry. The increasing number of publications reflects the growing recognition of communication as a vital mechanism for advancing sustainability goals, although the dominance of qualitative research limits the extent of empirical generalisation. The review identified three key areas of focus: communication for policy translation, communication tools and media, and institutional challenges. These findings highlight the importance of transparent, inclusive, and contextually grounded communication strategies that engage all organisational stakeholders, particularly administrative staff. The study contributes theoretically by integrating fragmented perspectives, empirically by mapping research trends, and methodologically by emphasising the need for more diverse approaches. Future research should expand methodological breadth, include underrepresented geographical contexts, and address credibility and transparency issues in digital communication to enhance both the theoretical rigour and practical application of sustainability communication.