



Triangulating ESG Communication Effectiveness: Combining Internal Narratives, Public Perceptions, and Secondary Evidence

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Abstract: Environmental, social, and governance (ESG) communication is expected to strengthen legitimacy and trust, yet its effectiveness is rarely assessed by looking at how internal narratives, public perceptions, and formal disclosures line up with each other. This study evaluates ESG communication effectiveness in an Indonesian state-owned enterprise by comparing what the company believes it communicates, what is documented in official channels, and what the public actually perceives. The research uses a descriptive-qualitative case design supported by descriptive survey data and a triangulation method that combines semi-structured interviews with communication and sustainability practitioners, an online survey of 106 internet users, and secondary evidence from sustainability reports, annual reports, and corporate websites. These three evidence streams are organized into a convergence-divergence matrix covering visibility, message clarity, credibility, channel fit, and brand architecture. Results show a clear misalignment: unaided awareness of the company's ESG initiatives is only 17.0%, message clarity is moderate (2.42/4), and credibility is perceived as fair (3.30/5), despite the presence of assured ESG data and active digital channels. The study concludes that the main weaknesses of current ESG communication lie in salience, clarity, and explicit brand ownership, while channel choice and the availability of proof-points are relative strengths. The findings support prior work on ESG communication gaps and extend it by showing how the use of a white-label ESG campaign brand can unintentionally weaken the link between ESG performance and the corporate brand, thus highlighting the importance of aligning content, channels, and brand architecture in future ESG communication strategies.

Keywords: ESG Communication, Communication Strategy, Triangulation, Public Perceptions, Communication Effectiveness

Introduction

In recent years, environmental, social, and governance (ESG) performance has become a central reference point when organizations discuss sustainability and corporate responsibility. ESG is increasingly used to build legitimacy, attract investors, and strengthen trust, particularly in emerging markets where state-owned enterprises play a visible public role (Du et al., 2010; Fombrun & Van Riel, 2004). In Indonesia, the Financial Services Authority (Otoritas Jasa Keuangan/OJK) requires financial institutions, issuers, and listed companies to implement sustainable finance and publish sustainability reports on a regular basis (OJK, 2017). This regulatory push intensifies the need for clearer and more structured ESG communication, not only as an add-on to the annual report but as part of long-term reputation and trust-building (Bharadwaj et al., 2022).

However, more ESG communication does not automatically translate into more effective ESG communication. Organizations may feel that reports, websites, and social media already represent intensive efforts, while stakeholders still experience ESG messages as distant, technical, or difficult to recall. Prior studies show a persistent distance between corporate narratives and how stakeholders actually perceive sustainability messages, including in state-owned enterprises and regulated sectors (Ellerup Nielsen & Thomsen, 2018; Morsing & Schultz, 2006). Much of the existing work focuses on the quality of disclosure and ESG scores, often based on reporting frameworks and indices, rather than on how ESG communication is noticed, understood, and trusted by non-expert audiences (de Silva Lokuwaduge & Heenetigala, 2017; Trianaputri & Djakman, 2019). At the same time, stakeholder-oriented approaches argue that communication should reflect stakeholder information needs and preferred channels rather than only internal framings and reporting logics (Freeman, 1984; Morsing & Schultz, 2006).

Against this background, this paper examines ESG communication as a multi-layered process that operates across at least three perspectives: internal interpretations of what has been communicated, formal documentation in reports and websites, and public perceptions formed through everyday exposure to content. The core research question is: How can the effectiveness of ESG communication be assessed through triangulation of internal narratives, public perceptions, and secondary evidence? The study aims to (1) describe how internal practitioners interpret and design ESG communication, (2) analyze how the public perceives ESG messages, from exposure and awareness to understanding, trust, and channel preferences, and (3) compare these two sides with available secondary evidence to identify areas of convergence and divergence that matter for ESG communication effectiveness. In doing so, the paper also pays particular attention to brand architecture, especially the use of a white-label ESG campaign account, as a structural factor that may help make ESG content feel accessible while simultaneously weakening brand association if not carefully managed (Clarkson, 1995; Donaldson & Preston, 1995).

Methodologically, the paper adopts a descriptive–qualitative case study design supported by descriptive survey data (Eccles et al., 2014; Mitchell et al., 1997). It focuses on a large Indonesian state-owned enterprise in the telecommunications sector and combines three streams of evidence: semi-structured interviews with communication and sustainability practitioners, an online survey of public perceptions, and secondary data from

sustainability reports, annual reports, and corporate websites. These evidence streams are analyzed using thematic analysis, descriptive statistics, and document analysis, and then brought together through a triangulation approach that organizes findings in a convergence–divergence matrix (Denzin, 1978; Flick, 2018; Jick, 1979). This design allows the study to compare what the organization believes it communicates, what is formally documented, and what the public actually picks up.

The remainder of the paper is organized as follows. Section II provides a literature review that discusses ESG communication, stakeholder theory, triangulation, and prior empirical work on ESG disclosure and audience perceptions. Section III presents the research context and explains the methodology, including data collection and analysis procedures. Section IV reports the analysis and findings, integrating internal narratives, survey results, and secondary evidence, and discusses their implications for ESG communication and brand architecture. Finally, Section V concludes with key points, practical recommendations, directions for future research, and limitations of the study.

Methodology

This study adopts a descriptive-qualitative design supported by descriptive quantitative data obtained through an online survey. The primary aim is to understand how ESG communication is designed and experienced from multiple perspectives rather than to test causal relationships (Creswell & Poth, 2018). Triangulation serves as a deliberate strategy to integrate interview insights, survey data, and document analysis, thereby strengthening credibility and revealing gaps that may remain undetected when using a single data source (Denzin, 1978; Flick, 2018). Data collection draws from three streams: internal narratives gathered through semi-structured interviews with communication and sustainability practitioners selected via purposive sampling; public perceptions captured through an online survey of Indonesian internet users using convenience and snowball sampling (Etikan et al., 2016; LLC, 2024); and secondary evidence extracted from sustainability reports, annual reports, corporate websites, and other public documents containing ESG-related information. Interview questions focused on communication objectives, messages, channels, audiences, and evaluation mechanisms. The survey measured familiarity with ESG, perceived exposure to company content, awareness of initiatives, clarity, understanding, trust, credibility, and preferred channels. Secondary documents were analyzed through content analysis to map key themes, types of claims, and supporting evidence (Hahn & Kühnen, 2013; Krippendorff, 2018).

Data analysis combined thematic analysis of interview transcripts (Braun & Clarke, 2006), descriptive statistical analysis of survey results, and content analysis of secondary documents to understand how ESG narratives are presented and supported. The three data streams were then integrated into a convergence–divergence matrix that grouped findings across dimensions such as visibility, message clarity, credibility, channel alignment, proof-points, audience priorities, rating context, and ESG brand ownership. Each matrix cell summarizes results from internal actors, public perceptions, and documentary evidence, and indicates whether the patterns are convergent, divergent, or partially aligned (Denzin, 1978). This matrix forms the analytical foundation for assessing the effectiveness of ESG communication and identifying specific gaps. Credibility was strengthened by cross-

checking themes across all data sources and by explicitly documenting inconsistencies (Miles et al., 2014). The study's main limitations arise from the use of non-probability sampling and the limited number of informants and organizational units, which positions the findings as exploratory rather than statistically generalizable.

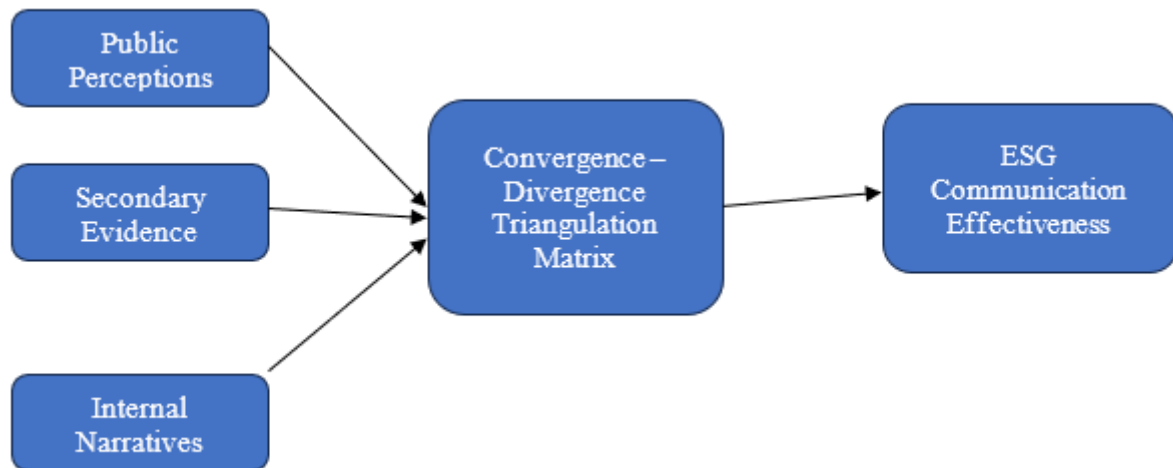


Figure 1. Conceptual Framework

Result and Discussion

Internal Narratives on ESG Communication

Interviews with sustainability/ESG and corporate communication teams show that the company views ESG as one of the foundations of long-term reputation. External audiences are defined broadly as the general public (customers and non-customers), with the acknowledgment that investors remain a priority audience for ESG communication. The working assumption is that better public understanding of ESG will indirectly support investor perceptions.

Within this thinking, ESG communication is often mapped along a simple sequence: exposure, awareness, understanding or clarity of message, and finally credibility and trust. This sequence is used to describe how ESG messages move from merely being present in channels to becoming information that stakeholders actually understand and believe.

Internally, the company works with a kind of "message house." At the top is a broad ESG commitment that functions as an overarching campaign identity. Below that, three main pillars represent environmental, social, and business dimensions. These pillars guide both content and reporting. A third layer links messages to concrete programs, measurable outcomes, and data, so that ESG communication is not just slogans but can be traced back to actions.

In execution, social media platforms such as Instagram, TikTok, and YouTube are treated as priority channels. Short videos of 30–45 seconds are seen as the main format, allowing one indicator or one impact story to be summarized in a way that is easy to digest and repeat. To maintain presence, the team aims to prepare a seven-day inventory of content that includes a mix of video posts, stories, and feed content, leaving some room for topical issues.

Outside digital channels, the sustainability report and annual report remain the main factual backbone. Ideally, short content on social media takes data and narratives from these reports, simplifies them, and directs audiences back to official channels when more detail is needed. The company also leverages collaborations with public figures and communities to expand its influence, particularly in areas related to community initiatives, support for small enterprises, and environmental efforts.

The interviews also reveal four recurring operational challenges: (1) data availability and verification processes, especially when up-to-date figures are needed, (2) limited creative assets (photos, videos, data visuals), which restrict story variation, (3) the need for coordination across multiple units, which can slow down prioritisation and timing; and (4) a perception that ESG topics are more technical and less attractive than innovation or product stories, requiring extra editorial effort to remain engaging.

To manage these constraints, the team monitors content performance, especially on Instagram, and uses these insights to decide which stories and formats deserve more resources. Overall, internal narratives describe an ESG communication ecosystem with a clear message framework and channels but still facing capacity and governance constraints.

Public Perceptions of ESG Communication

The online survey conducted from 6–29 October 2025 produced 106 respondents. Around 90.6% are customers and 9.4% are non-customers. Most respondents are aged 25–34 (about 66%), followed by 18–24 (22%), with the rest between 35–44 and 45–54. A small fraction (5.7%) live outside Indonesia but remain connected to the company’s digital ecosystem. This profile reflects a base of young adult, digitally active respondents who are relevant as a primary target for online ESG communication. The detailed profile of the online survey respondent is presented in Table 1.

Table 1. Respondent’s Profile

Item	Value
Sample size (n)	106 respondents
Fieldwork window	6–29 October 2025 (WIB)
Sampling approach	Non-probability, exploratory pulse (interpretation = descriptive)
Customer status	Customers: 96 (90.6%); non-customers: 10 (9.4%)
Age distribution	25–34 years: 66%; 18–24 years: 22%; 35–44 years: 8%; 45–54 years: 4%
Geography / audience	General public in Indonesia (mixed), with approximately 5.7% based outside Indonesia

In terms of exposure, about 34% of respondents say they rarely see ESG content from the company, and around 30% say they see it occasionally. Only around 17% can spontaneously mention any ESG initiative from the company without prompts (unaided awareness), while about 67.9% can recognize them when given a list of options (aided recognition). The difference between these two produces a salience gap of 50.9 percentage

points, which suggests that ESG as a concept is known, but the direct link between ESG and the company is still weak at the level of spontaneous recall.

Message clarity is rated at an average of 2.42 on a 1–4 scale, which indicates moderate clarity: information is not completely vague, but not consistently perceived as “clear” either. Credibility or trust in the company’s ESG communication stands at an average of 3.30 on a 1–5 scale, meaning respondents generally see the information as fairly credible but not yet highly trustworthy. In combination, low salience, moderate clarity, and mid-level credibility suggest that ESG messages are “there” but have not yet become a main reference when the public thinks about sustainability.

When split by customer status, the pattern becomes even clearer. Non-customers show 100% familiarity with the term ESG but 0% unaided awareness of the company’s ESG initiatives, with an average understanding of only 1.04 (on a 1–5 scale). Customers perform better, with unaided awareness at 24.4% and average understanding at 2.44, but there remains significant room for improvement. This confirms that the association between ESG and the company is fragile, especially beyond the core customer base.

In terms of channels, Instagram is the main discovery surface for ESG content (47.2% of respondents), followed by online news (26.4%), the official website (22.6%), and offline events or activations (17%). This reflects a digital-first communication ecosystem, where social media acts as the entry point, while official sites and reports serve as deeper references.

The most trusted sources for ESG information about the company are official reports and the website (34%), followed by company social media content (20.8%), news media (17%), and third-party ratings (15.1%). This suggests that formal channels remain the “home” of credibility, but independent sources are also important as external validators.

Preferred content formats reinforce the need for simplification. Respondents favor short videos/Reels (60.4%), followed by infographics or data cards (50.9%) and impact stories (45.3%). This aligns with previous research that complex topics like ESG are more digestible in concise visual formats that combine key figures with context. A concise summary of these perception indicators is provided in Table 2.

Table 2. Key Descriptive Indicator of ESG Communication

Construct / Variable	Result
Exposure frequency to the company’s ESG content	Rarely 34% ; Sometimes 30%
Unaided awareness of the company’s ESG initiatives	17%
Aided recognition of the company’s ESG initiatives	67.9% (excluding “None of the above”)
Salience gap (aided – unaided)	50.9 percentage points
Perceived clarity of ESG information	Mean = 2.42 (scale 1–4: 1 = not clear; 4 = very clear) — indicates moderate clarity
Perceived credibility / trust in ESG communication	Mean = 3.30 (scale 1–5: 1 = not credible; 5 = very credible)
Top discovery surfaces for ESG-related content	Instagram 47.2%; Online news 26.4%; Official website 22.6%; Offline events/activations 17%

Construct / Variable	Result
Most trusted sources for ESG information	Official reports/website 34.0%; Social media posts 20.8%; News media 17.0%; Third-party ratings 15.1%
Preferred formats for ESG communication	Short videos/Reels 60.4%; Infographics/data cards 50.9%; Impact stories 45.3%

Triangulation of Internal Narratives, Public Perceptions, and Secondary Evidence

To assess ESG communication effectiveness more holistically, findings from interviews, the survey, and document analysis were summarized in a convergence–divergence matrix (see table 3). The matrix covers several key dimensions, including visibility/salience, clarity, credibility, channel fit, proof-points, audience priority, rating context, and ESG brand ownership.

Table 3. Triangulation of ESG Communication Effectiveness

Topic	Internal narratives (interviews)	Public perceptions (survey)	Documentary evidence (reports/records)	Triangulation status
Visibility & salience	Communication leans heavily on the sustainability report; cadence in public channels is limited; ESG social account is kept relatively “white-label” to avoid looking too corporate.	Aided recognition of the company’s ESG initiatives is 67.9%, but unaided awareness is only 17.0%; 34% report not having seen the company’s ESG content.	The latest sustainability report contains many reusable metrics (e.g., emissions reduced; rollout of renewable/alt-energy sites), but they are mostly buried in long-form documents.	Diverge (work done ≠ noticed)
Clarity	Internal teams acknowledge the need for simpler language and more accessible packaging of ESG content.	Perceived clarity scores 2.42/4, below the “clear” category; some respondents find ESG messaging technical and abstract.	Sustainability and annual reports are dense and technical, with limited lay summaries or glossaries for non-expert readers.	Diverge
Credibility trust	Data are said to be sourced from the sustainability report and external assurance; ESG content is seen as	Average credibility/trust is 3.30/5: information is seen as somewhat credible, but respondents still look for confirmation from	Third-party ratings (e.g., ESG risk scores, ESG letter ratings) are available and can serve as external proof-points when cited properly. (MSCI, 2024)	Partial strong, communication moderate)

Topic	Internal narratives (interviews)	Public perceptions (survey)	Documentary evidence (reports/records)	Triangulation status
Channel fit	<p>“ready to verify” if challenged. Short-form video (Reels 30–45s) and social platforms are prioritised as main discovery surfaces, supported by a seven-day content inventory.</p>	<p>non-corporate sources. Instagram is the top discovery channel (47.2%), with short videos and infographics as the most preferred formats for ESG content.</p>	<p>Sustainability and annual reports remain the formal backbone but are complemented by a corporate website and social channels.</p>	Converge
Offline activation	<p>Offline events and activations are used selectively to highlight ESG-related programs.</p>	<p>Seventeen percent of respondents report discovering ESG-related content through events or offline activations.</p>	<p>Event documentation and campaign materials show ESG messaging connected to specific programs and impact stories.</p>	Converge
Proof-point themes	<p>Internal intention is to adopt a “metric-led” approach, turning KPIs into simple, repeatable proof-points.</p>	<p>Survey responses show high interest in concrete social and environmental impact such as community, environment, and inclusion.</p>	<p>Sustainability report provides a wide range of metrics and narratives that can be repurposed into proof-point content.</p>	Converge
Audience priority	<p>Investor-oriented narratives remain strong; ESG campaigns are designed to be inclusive but still anchored to corporate strategy.</p>	<p>Public survey suggests that everyday users and communities also expect relatable, locally grounded ESG stories.</p>	<p>Reporting structure is still largely shaped by investor and regulator expectations, with limited tailoring by audience segment.</p>	Partial
Ratings context	<p>ESG ratings are known internally but not used as the main story; they are treated as</p>	<p>Respondents view ratings and third-party recognition as useful credibility cues,</p>	<p>ESG ratings and rankings are available and updated periodically, providing time-stamped external</p>	Converge

Topic	Internal narratives (interviews)	Public perceptions (survey)	Documentary evidence (reports/records)	Triangulation status
Brand ownership architecture	supporting elements. The ESG social account is intentionally styled as a white-label brand with soft attribution to the parent company.	not as standalone messages. Aided recognition being much higher than unaided awareness suggests some uncertainty about who owns the ESG account and initiatives.	validation (Morningstar, 2025) Annual sustainability clearly position the parent company as the owner of ESG performance commitments.	Partial

Some dimensions show strong convergence. On channel fit, internal practitioners identify social media and short-form video as primary ESG channels, and this is confirmed by survey results that place Instagram and short video/infographic formats at the top. Official reports and the website continue to function as main formal sources, so the channel ecosystem is structurally aligned with audience media habits.

Convergence also appears on proof-points and rating context. Internally, ESG data rely on audited reports and established metrics. Official documents show strong indicators (such as emission reductions and renewable energy initiatives). The survey indicates that the public appreciates official reports and third-party ratings as credibility markers, useful “stamps” rather than stand-alone messages. The challenge is therefore not the absence of data, but how to translate them into user-friendly formats.

Other dimensions reveal clear divergence. On visibility and salience, internal narratives describe ESG communication as ongoing through reports, digital channels, and thematic campaigns. Yet the survey shows that only 17% of respondents can recall the company’s ESG initiatives spontaneously, and one-third say they rarely see ESG content. Operational constraints identified in interviews, slower content production due to verification, lack of creative assets, and perceived “low attractiveness” of ESG compared with other topics reduce communication rhythm and variety, making it harder for ESG messages to stand out. This misalignment reflects what legitimacy theory predicts: organizations often assume that disclosure alone signals responsibility, while stakeholders require *repeated, salient, and clearly attributed* messages before integrating ESG into their mental schemas. In other words, the gap between aided and unaided awareness indicates that ESG messages have not yet crossed the threshold into cognitive availability, a requirement for strong reputation-building.

On clarity, internal stakeholders recognize that they need simpler language and more everyday stories, yet much of the important information is still locked inside technical reports. The average clarity score of 2.42 (out of 4) suggests that audiences are not fully confident in their understanding. This moderate score is consistent with stakeholder theory, which emphasizes that communication should be shaped by stakeholder information needs rather than only by the company’s internal framing (Mitchel, 1997; Donaldson, 1995).

Technical ESG language, even when accurate, becomes ineffective if people cannot translate it into something personally meaningful, so ESG information ends up being perceived as “there but not fully understandable.” This pattern is in line with earlier studies showing that organizations often stop at “providing information” without checking whether it is truly comprehensible and relevant for their audiences.

On **credibility**, the triangulation suggests a partial alignment. From a content perspective, the company has strong evidence through verified reports and external ratings. From a perception perspective, the score of 3.30 (out of 5) suggests that the public tends to believe the information but still retains some skepticism and looks for confirmation from media and independent bodies. In a context where greenwashing is a concern, third-party validation becomes increasingly important as a complement, rather than a substitute, to corporate narratives.

Finally, the ESG brand ownership dimension is convergent at the document level but only partially aligned at the public level. In formal reports, the company clearly claims and explains its ESG performance. In day-to-day practice, however, the use of a white-label ESG social media account with only subtle attribution means that many audience members do not immediately connect the ESG content they see with the main company. This helps explain the wide gap between aided and unaided awareness: people recognize the company’s ESG programs when given prompts but do not automatically think of the company when they think about ESG.

These findings also reinforce insights from brand architecture theory, which suggest that weak brand attribution dilutes brand-linked meaning-making. A white-label ESG campaign may make the content feel more neutral and inclusive, but it also disrupts the pathways through which ESG performance should feed back into corporate reputation, limiting the strength of the association between the ESG work and the corporate brand.

Compared with previous ESG communication studies, these findings both confirm and extend existing knowledge. Prior research has already suggested that strong ESG or CSR reporting does not guarantee high awareness or trust and that stakeholders demand accessible, audience-relevant narratives (Du et al., 2010; Ellerup Nielsen & Thomsen, 2018; Sustainalytics, 2025). This study supports that view: even with an assured sustainability report and digital channels in place, the public still reports low spontaneous awareness, moderate clarity, and only mid-level trust.

At the same time, the results highlight an additional gap that is less discussed in the literature: the role of ESG brand architecture. Many studies implicitly assume that if disclosure is credible and channels are appropriate, brand reputation will benefit (Fombrun & Van Riel, 2004; Schmeltz, 2014). This case shows that brand architecture can interrupt that relationship. A white-label or “neutral” ESG campaign account may make content feel lighter and more inclusive, but if brand attribution is too soft, it can weaken the mental link between ESG performance and the corporate brand. This “missing link” helps explain why ESG can be visible in content but still low in brand-level salience. In that sense, the study fills an “unknown” gap by specifying how structural communication choices around branding can shape whether ESG efforts are actually recognized as belonging to the company (Bharadwaj et al., 2022; Kliamenakis et al., 2025).

Conclusion

The analysis largely confirms the initial expectation that there is a gap between formal ESG disclosure and public-level outcomes. Even in the presence of an assured sustainability report and active digital channels, ESG communication from the case organization does not translate into high spontaneous awareness, strong clarity, or very high trust. The findings also support the expectation that a white-label ESG campaign account weakens the spontaneous association between ESG performance and the corporate brand when attribution remains soft. In that sense, the working assumptions derived from the literature on ESG disclosure, stakeholder communication, and brand architecture are broadly supported by the evidence from this triangulated case.

Beyond confirming what earlier studies have suggested, the results offer two specific contributions. First, they show empirically how cross-source triangulation can be used to diagnose ESG communication effectiveness by comparing internal narratives, public perceptions, and secondary documentation within a single convergence–divergence matrix. This moves the discussion away from assuming that disclosure quality or channel use alone can serve as proxies for effectiveness, and towards a more nuanced view that asks whether messages are actually visible, understandable, and trusted. Second, the study adds to the relatively limited discussion of ESG brand architecture by documenting how a white-label ESG campaign, designed to make content feel neutral and accessible, can unintentionally limit brand-level salience when corporate attribution remains subtle. This helps explain why ESG work can be “seen” in content but still not fully recognized as belonging to the company.

The institutional and managerial implications are concrete. For state-owned and regulated enterprises in particular, ESG communication strategies need to prioritize not only compliance and disclosure but also brand-linked meaning-making. The case suggests three priorities for practice: strengthening the explicit association between the corporate brand and ESG initiatives, especially in white-label or campaign accounts; simplifying key ESG messages into short videos, infographics, and impact stories that fit everyday digital consumption; and using third-party ratings and recognitions as an additional layer of proof that complements, rather than replaces, the organization’s own narrative. At a broader system level, regulators and policymakers encouraging sustainable finance may also need to pay more attention to how ESG information is translated into public-facing communication, not only how it is reported in formal documents.

At the same time, the study has clear limitations. It relies on non-probability sampling for the public survey and on a single organizational case, which restricts statistical generalization and makes the findings best read as exploratory rather than definitive. Future research could expand the framework to multiple organizations and sectors, use more representative samples, and test more directly how triangulated measures of ESG communication relate to behavioral outcomes such as service usage, investment intentions, or support for sustainability initiatives. Comparative studies across different brand architectures, ranging from fully integrated to strongly endorsed to white-label ESG brands, would also help to clarify how structural branding choices shape the effectiveness of ESG communication.

Taken together, the study argues that ESG communication effectiveness depends less on how much is disclosed and more on how credible proof-points are translated into visible, clear, and strongly branded narratives that stakeholders can easily recognize and connect to the corporate actor behind them.

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