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A reassessment of sustainability communication in Asian development initiatives

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Sustainability communication plays a critical role in fostering behavior change, public engagement, and policy advocacy. However, existing research often under-theorizes the roles of culture, power, and localized narratives in shaping communication effectiveness, particularly in Asia. This paper explores how culturally attuned, multimodal communication strategies, ranging from social media campaigns to grassroots advocacy and strategic storytelling, can encourage participation and reduce the 'psychological distance' from sustainability challenges. Three communication cases from India, Myanmar, and Mongolia were analyzed to examine rhetorical strategies, narrative framing, and audience reception. Findings suggest that repositioning sustainability communication as a relational and transformational practice, rooted in intercultural understanding, can produce meaningful results. When the values of participants are genuinely acknowledged, and two-way dialogue is fostered, communication shifts from being instructional to collaborative. This shared process, grounded in local talents and stories, can lead to a stronger sense of ownership and pride in outcomes. The case studies include: a public transportation campaign in India, promoting electric vehicles and 4-stroke auto-rickshaws; a plastic bag reduction campaign launched in Myanmar's local markets; and transmedia storytelling initiatives in Mongolia, conveying the stories of herders, and how they are collaborating to protect the rangeland and ensuring animal welfare nationwide. The paper argues that when communication is emotionally resonant, and structurally enabling – drawing on critiques of dominant discursive strategies in sustainability, hope-based communication theory, and participatory co-creation – it can support transformative change. It concludes with recommendations for communicators and scholars working at the intersection of sustainability and public engagement in the Global South.

KEYWORDS

discourse analysis, strategic storytelling, sustainability communication, behavior change, Asia

1 Introduction

As the sustainability of the planet becomes a mainstream preoccupation, cutting across environmental, economic, and governance domains, the ability to communicate effectively about urgency, complexity, and solutions has become central to public engagement, policy action, and behavior change. Yet, communicating about sustainability remains an underdeveloped and inconsistently applied practice, particularly in the Global South where diverse cultural contexts and systemic inequities often shape both the message and how it is heard and acted upon. In Asia, home to over half of the world's population and many of the fastest-growing economies, the challenges of unsustainable consumption and production are deeply entangled with local values, governance structures, and socio-economic transitions. Despite growing awareness of their limitations, the dominant models of sustainability

communication still reflect technical jargon and individualistic behavioral framings rooted in Eurocentric perspectives – and these often fail to resonate with Asian audiences. Moreover, mainstream approaches tend to prioritize top-down and donor-centric messaging, favouring simplified awareness campaigns over culturally embedded narratives or participatory methods that would encourage deeper reflection and change.

Sustainable economic development, as defined by the United Nations Brundtland Commission, refers to “meeting the needs of the present without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs” (World Commission on Environment and Development, 1987). This holistic approach extends beyond natural resources to encompass social equity, human rights, economic resilience, and overall well-being. Nevertheless, despite this broad conceptual scope, sustainability is still too often communicated and practiced within reductionist silos. Mainstream discourse tends to separate economics from social and environmental dimensions, treating it as a domain detached from issues such as education, health, climate resilience, and social justice. This fragmentation diminishes the transformative potential of sustainability narratives and reinforces a narrow, technocratic perspective that neglects the interdependence of such dimensions.

In sustainability communication, this siloed framing becomes obvious in the emphasis generally placed on individual behavior change. Public campaigns frequently target household-level actions, such as reducing food and plastic waste, conserving water and energy, or shifting mobility habits, without addressing the broader political, economic, and infrastructural systems that constrain these choices. As Bendor (2021) argues, this overreliance on the individual as the primary agent of change masks the systemic nature of unsustainable practices and overlooks the structural drivers of environmental degradation. In Asia, where socio-economic conditions vary widely and public infrastructure remains uneven, individual-centric messaging further limits the capacity of communication to drive meaningful transitions.

Moreover, the role of media in shaping public understanding of sustainability has often been compromised by a lack of capacity, resources, or editorial autonomy. While media coverage of climate and environmental issues in Asia has increased, in-depth and integrative reporting on sustainability remains limited. Journalists frequently lack training in sustainability science or fail to draw connections between consumer behavior, business practices, and ecological outcomes. Under the influence of corporate sponsorship or economic narratives that prioritize growth, media content may inadvertently reinforce the false dichotomy between economic development and environmental protection. This dichotomy constrains the public imagination and reduces sustainability to a zero-sum trade-off.

This communicative gap extends into the professional realm. Despite the growing prominence of environmental, social, and governance (ESG) criteria in corporate strategies and the mainstreaming of sustainability in policy agendas, particularly under frameworks such as the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) and the Paris Agreement, a disconnect persists between technical expertise and public messaging. As Julia Giannini, a corporate responsibility professional, observes, “Carbon dioxide levels, degrees of warming and environmental concepts are not going to motivate behavioral change. You need the communication and marketing experts in the room, who know how to frame messages that cut

through, that are easy to understand, and allow people to act” [in Radley Yeldar, (2018)]. Her statement captures the essence of the problem. The complexity of sustainability requires not only scientific rigor but also communication strategies that resonate with diverse audiences and translate data and knowledge into actionable narratives. A story needs to be told. Even in the private sector, where sustainability has become a competitive advantage and a reputational imperative, many environmentally conscious companies struggle to communicate their commitments effectively. Despite robust marketing teams, few brands manage to clearly articulate how their products and operations are aligned with sustainability principles. Mixed signals, vague language, and unverified eco-labels contribute to consumer scepticism. Without clear, credible, and compelling narratives, the potential of communication to drive the uptake of sustainable consumption and production practices remains untapped.

To bridge this gap, sustainability communication must evolve from being a secondary function to a core strategic discipline that is worth investing in. It requires not only an accurate translation of scientific concepts but also narrative craft, cultural literacy, and a systems-thinking mindset. Communicators in development contexts, in particular, must be equipped to connect policy frameworks with lived realities, systemic challenges with local practices, and global goals with culturally rooted values. Only then can sustainability narratives inspire the kind of collective imagination and action required to support genuine transitions.

This paper argues that a more contextualized and critical approach to sustainability communication is urgently needed, one that acknowledges the politics of knowledge, embraces diverse worldviews, and draws upon interdisciplinary theories and practices suited to local contexts. Rather than treating communication as mere information dissemination (as it is often viewed in most development projects worldwide), it is understood here as a transdisciplinary, relational practice that fosters understanding, inspires change, and connects scientific knowledge with social action (Godemann and Michelsen, 2011).

To explore how this reconceptualization can be applied in practice, the paper draws examples from critical discourse analysis, behavior change theory, and sustainability science to investigate how communication strategies can be reimagined to empower those who stand to benefit the most from sustainability projects and programmes, reduce psychological distance, and most importantly, support the co-creation of meaning. Through the analysis of three country projects from India, Myanmar, and Mongolia, this paper examines how multimodal strategies, visual storytelling, and grassroots messaging have been employed to engage citizens, businesses, and policymakers around pressing sustainability challenges. These case studies serve as lenses through which to reflect on communication efforts not only as channels for disseminating knowledge, but as contested arenas where values, emotions, power relations, and identities are negotiated (Avelino et al., 2016; Hess, 2014). By bridging theoretical insights with grounded field experience, this paper can contribute to the evolving scholarship on environmental and sustainability communication. A framework for culturally grounded and socially responsive messaging that is both locally relevant and globally informed is proposed, thus answering calls for more inclusive, reflexive, and situated approaches to communication within sustainability transitions, particularly in contexts where Western-centric or donor-driven paradigms dominate.

2 Theoretical framework

Sustainability communication, as a multidisciplinary domain, occupies a unique space at the intersection of environmental studies, communication theory, and sociocultural analysis. Its emergence reflects the growing recognition that technical solutions and scientific facts alone are insufficient to drive sustainability transitions; instead, the narratives, discourses, and cultural framings through which sustainability is communicated play a significant role in shaping public perceptions, motivations, and actions. However, much of the current research in this field remains fragmented, with scholarly work often compartmentalized within corporate public relations, environmental journalism, or institutional branding (Weder et al., 2021; Verket et al., 2021; Fischer et al., 2021; Godemann and Michelsen, 2011). These contributions, while valuable, frequently fail to address the deeply embedded cultural, political, and emotional dimensions that inform how sustainability messages are constructed, circulated, and received, particularly in non-Western contexts.

In this context, sustainability communication is approached as a discursive and relational practice, one that is fundamentally shaped by the interplay of power, culture, and context. Drawing from the tradition of Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA), particularly the works of Fairclough (1995) and van Dijk (2008), sustainability narratives are analyzed and examined to see how they both reflect and reproduce dominant ideologies and framings. In the field of sustainability, common discursive strategies such as *catastrophism*, where doom-laden narratives generate despair rather than action (Swyngedouw, 2010), and *responsibilization*, where complex systemic problems are reframed as the outcome of poor individual consumer choices (Carvalho and Peterson, 2012), are critiqued. Additionally, the analytical framework draws on hope-based communication theory, which emphasizes the importance of positive emotional framing, agency, and solutions-oriented messaging to counteract apathy and fear (Finkler and Aitken, 2021). This is complemented by participatory and *co-creative approaches* to communication (Servaes and Malikhao, 2005), which foreground the role of local actors and communities not as passive recipients of messages but as active contributors to the creation of meaning. These perspectives are particularly pertinent to Asia, where traditions of collectivism, community-based decision-making, and storytelling offer alternative paradigms for engaging with sustainability.

3 Methodology

Methodologically, the paper integrates three analytical lenses: Framing Theory, Agenda-Setting Theory, and Critical and Multimodal Discourse Analysis. Framing Theory (Entman, 1993; Nisbet, 2009) is used to identify how sustainability issues are selectively presented through linguistic, visual, and narrative cues that influence interpretation and engagement. Particular attention is paid to whether frames emphasize doom and sacrifice, or instead promote agency, hope, and systemic transformation. This is complemented by Agenda-Setting Theory (McCombs and Shaw, 1972), which helps unpack how communication campaigns attempt to shape public and policy attention toward specific sustainability priorities, especially in contexts where the latter are not yet mainstreamed.

The analysis is further informed by Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) (Fairclough, 1995; van Dijk, 2008) to explore how power, ideology, and cultural assumptions are embedded in sustainability narratives; and, Multimodal Discourse Analysis (MDA) (Djonov and Zhao, 2014) to examine the visual, spatial, and interactive elements of sustainability campaigns. MDA is particularly relevant in Asia, where digital platforms and visual media are central to social interaction and where communicative effectiveness often relies on emotional resonance, symbolism, and culturally specific visual cues.

3.1 Analytical scope and case selection

A theory-informed, illustrative case analysis approach is adopted to examine sustainability communication in diverse Asian contexts. The research draws on selected project experiences that present a valuable testing ground for assessing how communication strategies evolve in complex socio-cultural landscapes. The selection of three cases from India, Myanmar, and Mongolia was guided by their geographic, thematic, and methodological diversity. Each project represented a distinctive approach to sustainability communication, reflecting variations in media channels, community involvement, and local challenges.

In India, the focus was on mobility and air pollution, employing a behavior-change campaign supported by app-based tools and emotionally resonant storytelling.

In Myanmar, the emphasis was on plastic waste and grassroots advocacy, facilitated through low-cost, socially embedded outreach during a time of political disruption.

In Mongolia, the project centered on sustainable production in the cashmere value chain, using transmedia storytelling to communicate environmental and social implications through human-interest narratives.

Each case was examined through campaign outputs, documentation, public media content, and, where possible, informal interviews and reflections from communication managers. In India, the analysis covered multimodal, narrative-driven messaging disseminated between 2016 and 2020, including publications, video and radio campaigns, social media materials, influencer initiatives, international and national media coverage, policy briefs, and reports. In Myanmar, the review drew on the Campaign's internal Monitoring and Evaluation Report, influencer messaging, social media content, audience engagement data, and communications led by the Prevent Plastics Project. In Mongolia, the study examined human-interest, multimodal narratives such as *The True Cost of Cashmere*, *A Cashmere Future*, *Mongolian Cashmere – Sustainable Solutions for Producers*, and *A Cashmere Story*, along with other video productions by the STeP EcoLab project. The analysis builds on insights gathered through direct involvement with these projects during their implementation. Although not derived from formal ethnographic fieldwork, this embedded perspective enables a situated reading of how communication practices are shaped by the cultural and institutional dynamics of each setting.

3.2 Limitations

The findings presented in this paper are inherently exploratory and do not purport to offer generalizable conclusions. The cases were

not selected to represent all communication practices employed by development stakeholders across Asia more broadly. Instead, they were chosen to illustrate a variety of strategies and approaches, highlighting the importance of context and narrative in shaping the reception and impact of sustainability communication. Furthermore, the study does not include systematic audience research or post-campaign evaluation, which limits the ability to quantify behavioral impact. Insights are based on observed engagement, qualitative feedback, and campaign reach as documented in public project reports. These constraints highlight the need for future research to incorporate longitudinal studies, audience perception analysis, and media reception methodologies to deepen understanding of how sustainability communication performs in real-world contexts. Despite these limitations, the analysis contributes meaningfully to the dialogue between theory and practice by offering a grounded account of what makes communication strategies effective, or limited, within dynamic and culturally rich environments, and it lays the foundation for a more reflexive and context-sensitive scholarship in sustainability communication, particularly within the Global South.

4 Country cases: communicating sustainability in practice

The selected case studies offer an instructive arena to examine how sustainability communication can be tailored and operationalized within diverse Asian contexts. This section presents three illustrative country cases from India, Myanmar, and Mongolia, shedding light on their strategic use of multimodal and narrative-driven messaging to address sustainability challenges through public engagement, cultural sensitivity, and local relevance.

In India, the Namma Auto project represents a comprehensive initiative to promote clean mobility and sustainable urban transport in India, particularly in the cities of Bengaluru and Chennai. At its core, the project encourages the adoption of electric and 4-stroke auto-rickshaws to reduce emissions and combat urban air pollution. Recognizing the key role of auto-rickshaw drivers in the public transport ecosystem, the project also seeks to improve their financial well-being through access to low-interest loans and financial inclusion programs. By employing an ecosystem approach, Namma Auto brings together drivers, policymakers, and industry actors to build a supportive infrastructure that facilitates the transition toward sustainable transport solutions. Its strategy involves the integration of auto-rickshaws as last-mile connectors to metro stations, thereby enhancing the efficiency and inclusivity of urban public transport systems. Beyond technical and financial interventions, the project emphasizes behavioral change, using awareness campaigns and targeted communication to shift perceptions and practices around clean mobility. Policy engagement forms another central pillar of the initiative, as project stakeholders actively collaborate with government officials to identify and address regulatory gaps in the sustainable transport landscape. In terms of impact, *the project has successfully reached over 30,000 auto-rickshaw drivers across the two cities. It has catalyzed the adoption of electric rickshaws in Chennai and facilitated a transition to 4-stroke vehicles in Bengaluru.* These interventions have been underpinned by behavioral research and public outreach efforts, with the adoption of a behavior change

strategy rooted in emotional storytelling, visual campaigns, and public trust-building. By launching an app-based ride-booking service for clean and shared auto rides, and branding vehicles with simple yet evocative messages like “Be part of the solution, not the pollution,” the campaign centred its appeal on collective well-being and co-benefits rather than environmental sacrifice. Metro stations became storytelling hubs, adorned with visuals connecting clean transport to health, safety, and pride in community. The campaign integrated online and offline components and aligned with COVID-19 protocols to promote hygiene-certified vehicles. *With over seven million people reached in just seven months, the project demonstrated how narratives of hope and shared responsibility can resonate when reinforced by institutional partnerships, such as those with metro authorities and driver unions.* This case foregrounds the effectiveness of multimodal, participatory strategies that locate sustainability within the fabric of urban identity and everyday practices.

The Prevent Plastics project in Myanmar unfolded under different conditions, namely political instability, limited formal waste management infrastructure, and a growing dependence on single-use plastics, particularly in rural and peri-urban areas. Despite such constraints and backed up by baseline studies and behavior insights, the project has effectively mobilized grassroots action by employing local storytelling, peer-to-peer messaging, and cost-effective appeals in its efforts to transition toward more sustainable lifestyles. The campaign commenced with a pilot initiative at the Yankin evening market in Yangon. Vendors at this market commonly utilize plastic bags to package fresh produce; however, rising plastic costs have increasingly shifted the financial burden onto them. To mitigate this burden and reduce plastic waste, the Prevent Plastics project launched the “No Thank You” campaign, *encouraging vendors to display posters carrying the message: “Your refusal of one plastic bag can help the vendor save up to nine kyats (approximately €0.004).”* Vendors readily participated, displaying the posters in their shops and noting that their work would be considerably easier if customers brought their own reusable bags. On average, each vendor purchases between 2 and 15 packs of plastic bags per week (100 bags per pack), with costs ranging from 500 kyats (approximately €0.20) to over 1,000 kyats (approximately €0.40), depending on bag size. By decreasing their reliance on plastic bags, vendors not only reduce operational expenses but also lessen their environmental impact. This reframing of plastic refusal as an act of economic solidarity allowed environmental behavior change to emerge as an extension of local concerns. The project strategically deployed multilingual posters, community events, influencers’ outreach, and content on CANAL+ Myanmar, while social media outreach *reached over nine million individuals within a year.* What distinguishes this campaign is its ability to sustain engagement during a national crisis, shedding light on how emotional intelligence, trust, and economic framing can help bypass political barriers and cultivate change from the bottom up. *By recognizing vendors not as contributors to pollution but as frontline agents of change, the campaign advanced a discourse of empowerment and collective resilience.* The campaign eventually expanded to multiple regions, including Yangon, Patheingyi, and Kachin, engaging 870 vendors across 42 markets. This growth reflected increasing awareness and acceptance of the importance of

reducing plastic waste, as well as a shift in behaviors toward more sustainable practices.

The Mongolian case, centered on the Sustainable Textile Production and Ecolabelling in Mongolia (STeP EcoLab) project, illustrates the power of storytelling in rehumanizing sustainability discourse within global value chains. Mongolia is one of the world's largest producers of cashmere, yet its expanding industry has raised serious concerns about land degradation and rural vulnerability. *An example of successful communication approaches employed by the project revolved around narrating the life and voice of Urnaa, a female herder and board member of a local cooperative who is championing sustainable livestock practices.* The True Cost of Cashmere deployed transmedia storytelling (McErlean, 2018), merging video portraits, visual storytelling, testimonial writing, and expert commentary, to position sustainability as a lived experience rather than a remote technical goal. Audiences followed Urnaa's journey through the landscape, learning about cooperative decision-making, and the challenges of balancing tradition and innovation. By focusing on one individual, this storytelling production achieved emotional proximity, translating systemic issues into human stories without falling into the trap of victimhood. Following a similar approach, *A Cashmere Future* (by the Agronomes et Vétérinaires Sans Frontières – AVSF and the French Facility for Global Environment), *Mongolian Cashmere – Sustainable Solutions for Producers* (by Aljazeera), and *A Cashmere Story* (by AVSF and Humus – Fonds Pour La Biodiversité), along with other documentary productions highlighting AVSF's efforts to promote sustainability across the entire wool and cashmere value chain – from herders to end users – consistently maintain a strong human interest focus, with the herder's voice prominently featured. These media productions were disseminated through a multitude of digital channels, local media, and international platforms. *The human-interest approach taken emphasizes authenticity over abstraction, co-creation over consumption, and relational rather than transactional representations of sustainability.*

Taken together, these cases offer a comparative lens on how sustainability communication can be practiced as a discursive intervention rooted in cultural nuance, co-created narratives, and multimodal engagement. They demonstrate the value of moving away from one-size-fits-all messaging toward reflexive and inclusive communication strategies that acknowledge the lived realities and aspirations of diverse subjects and audiences. As Asia continues to navigate the socio-ecological transitions of the 21st century, and increased attention is being redirected to this region from Western donors funding sustainability initiatives, these insights provide an empirical foundation for reassessing not only how sustainability messages are crafted, conveyed, and contested; but also where communication budgets should be spent, and which strategies could be employed for greater impact.

5 Results

The empirical insights emerging from the three case studies presented are a reflection of the transformative potential of sustainability communication when it is grounded in localized realities and articulated through inclusive and multimodal strategies. Applying Fairclough's three-dimensional framework (text, discursive practice, and social practice) and van Dijk's socio-cognitive model, the

analysis sheds light on how sustainability messages are not merely transmitted but socially constructed through language, power, and ideology. Rather than adhering to universalized or technocratic models of communication, each campaign and media production demonstrated the value of context-sensitive approaches that reflect the lived experiences, cultural priorities, and economic concerns of target communities.

Across all cases, *language and ideology were co-constitutive.* Campaigns that achieved strong public engagement aligned with local values and belief systems, such as economic pragmatism in Myanmar, community pride in India, and cultural heritage in Mongolia, rather than relying on externally imposed or universalist sustainability discourses. By anchoring sustainability in lived realities, these campaigns avoided abstraction and cultivated identification. As van Dijk emphasizes, such alignment reflects shared *social cognition*, wherein discourse draws upon collectively held values, mental models, and social representations.

One of the most significant lessons learned is the power of localized framing in fostering relevance and resonance. Communicators successfully translated abstract sustainability imperatives into everyday concerns across all three cases: air quality and health in India, cost savings and dignity in Myanmar, and cultural heritage and rural identity in Mongolia. These framings reduced psychological distance by making sustainability an issue of immediate relevance rather than a distant or abstract concept. By aligning messages with values that already hold meaning for local communities, communicators were able to reframe sustainable behavior as both feasible and desirable. In doing so, the power to shape sustainability discourse was exercised through *control over narrative production and dissemination.* Each campaign made conscious efforts to decentralize this power by centering marginalized voices:

In India, the Namma Auto campaign fostered *discursive co-ownership* by integrating auto-rickshaw drivers and metro authorities in both the messaging and design. Drivers were not passive recipients but active co-creators and agents of communication, thus challenging top-down approaches and enhancing the legitimacy of the campaign.

In Myanmar, *peer-to-peer communication* empowered market vendors and informal workers to become knowledge disseminators within their own communities. This redistribution of communicative authority resisted prevailing narratives that had positioned them as contributors to pollution, instead recognizing their agency.

In Mongolia, storytelling centered on Urnaa, a female herder and cooperative board member, positioned her not as an object of sustainability discourse but as its *protagonist and narrator.* This shift mitigated discursive injustice, allowing for self-representation and validation of indigenous knowledge.

Closely related to the concept of localized framing is the emotional architecture of the campaigns, which consistently privileged messages of hope, pride, and agency over fear or guilt. This approach drew on *shared social cognition*, making sustainability more immediate, relatable, and actionable. Emotional proximity facilitated by such framing was particularly effective in translating global sustainability imperatives into local aspirations. In line with research on hope-based communication (Finkler and Aitken, 2021), the campaigns intentionally avoided catastrophist rhetoric. Instead, they cultivated affective engagement by drawing attention to what could be gained – cleaner streets, healthier families, empowered livelihoods – rather

than what might be lost. This emotional positioning not only increased message receptivity but also helped create positive associations with sustainability, making change appear both possible and worthwhile.

Equally crucial was the emphasis placed on trust and authenticity. Particularly in contexts marked by political instability or institutional mistrust, the credibility of a message depends heavily on who communicates it and how. Each project succeeded in enhancing authenticity through co-creation, which meant involving local actors in the design and dissemination of communication content. Rather than imposing messages from above, or aligning with a particular donor agenda, campaigns were grounded in community insights, voices, and stories. Whether through testimonials from herders in Mongolia, market vendors in Myanmar, or transport workers in India, these narratives helped foster legitimacy and identification, reinforcing the idea that sustainability is not an external imposition but a locally owned process of transformation.

The multimodal character of the campaigns and media productions also played a central role in their effectiveness. By combining textual, visual, spatial, and interactive elements, the campaigns accommodated diverse modes of learning and engagement. Infographics, video stories, branded vehicles, and participatory events allowed complex issues to be communicated in accessible and emotionally compelling ways. In India, branding and visual storytelling transformed metro stations into narrative spaces connecting clean transport to public health and community pride. In Myanmar, posters, market events, social media and influencers' outreach, blended economic messages with environmental appeals, creating hybrid spaces of learning. In Mongolia, transmedia storytelling merged video, testimonials, and expert insights to deliver nuanced messages about sustainability in global value chains.

This multimodal literacy was especially important in reaching non-expert audiences and in ensuring that the message remained salient across different media ecologies. However, while the campaigns achieved visibility and engagement, their long-term impact ultimately depends on the broader institutional and policy context in which they are embedded. As Fairclough notes, texts cannot be analyzed in isolation from the institutional and socio-political contexts in which they are produced and consumed. Communication alone cannot sustain behavior change unless there are enabling environments such as accessible alternatives, supportive regulations, and financial incentives that allow people to act on their intentions. This simple reality highlights the need for greater integration between communication strategies and structural interventions. Only when communication is part of a systemic, multi-level approach to sustainability can its full transformative potential be realized.

Finally, the cases collectively call for a deeper involvement in local cultures when designing sustainability communication strategies. The tendency to reproduce Western-centric messaging tropes, such as generic green icons, or the outdated aesthetics of 'stock sustainability' (two hands cupped around plants and trees, green lightbulbs, wind turbines, water drops, globes, polar bears on melting ice, eco-friendly shopping tags, handshakes, among many other examples), and technical jargon, was consciously avoided in all three campaigns. Instead, communicators embraced cultural specificity, linguistic diversity, and storytelling rooted in local knowledge. This shift toward decolonized communication practices not only increased effectiveness but also contributed to a more inclusive and pluralistic vision of sustainability.

6 Conclusion

This paper has argued for a fundamental reassessment of how sustainability communication is conceptualized and practiced, particularly in the context of the Global South. Analyzing three case studies from India, Myanmar, and Mongolia has demonstrated how culturally grounded and participatory communication strategies can enhance public engagement, support behavior change, and how co-ownership of sustainability transitions can be fostered. Moving beyond the limitations of top-down, Eurocentric, or fear-based models, the paper has shown that sustainability communication is most effective when treated not merely as a tool for transmitting information but as a relational and transformative practice embedded in everyday life.

By bringing visibility to alternative pathways, amplifying marginalized voices, and fostering emotional connection, communication becomes a catalyst for transformation. To advance the paradigm shift mentioned at the outset, several core recommendations emerge from the analysis.

First, language and ideology are co-constitutive: to be effective, communication must be contextually attuned, aligning sustainability goals with the specific cultural, social, and economic realities of target communities.

Second, power in discourse lies in narrative control: narratives should center stories of agency and resilience, foregrounding human experiences and avoiding narratives that alienate or overwhelm.

Third, multimodal discourse enhances accessibility and resonance across audiences: effective campaigns must use a combination of media formats, textual, visual, and oral, to appeal to diverse learning styles and media habits.

Fourth, discourse alone cannot sustain transformation: sustainability messages must be paired with enabling conditions and supportive infrastructure to ensure that people are not only informed and inspired, but also empowered to act.

Finally, social cognition shapes engagement: communicators must adopt a reflexive stance, continuously interrogating whose voices are included, whose knowledge is valued, and how meaning is co-produced in different contexts.

Data availability statement

The raw data supporting the conclusions of this article will be made available by the authors, without undue reservation.

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