Communicating green in Mekong Delta agritourism: greenwashing or green fantasy?

Mi Hoang[1,2]*, Tan Le Minh[1], My Tran Le Hoang[1] and
Ngan Nguyen Khanh[1]

[1]Faculty of Public Relations and Communication, Ho Chi Minh City University of Economics and
Finance, Ho Chi Minh City, Vietnam, [2]College of Media and International Culture, Zhejiang University,
Hangzhou, China

Background context: The Mekong Delta's agritourism potential is growing through government initiatives and unique attractions, but rapid development raises sustainability concerns amid gaps between promotional narratives and actual tourist experiences. This study examines how "green" efforts are framed across government, business, and media channels, identifying disparities to improve sustainability communication and practices.

Methods used: This study collects agritourism communication data from four sources, including government websites, business promotions, media, and tourist reviews. A hybrid coding approach analyzed the data using 14 pre-defined themes. Data is qualitative and quantitative analysis with CDA, RTA and CL.

Key findings: Media coverage romanticizes agritourism, lacks critical voices and technological innovation, while government websites emphasize green policies and digital transformation but risk greenwashing with vague climate plans. Tourism companies promote "green" imagery but show clear greenwashing signs such as lack of certifications, low eco-infrastructure, whereas international tourists report mixed experiences, and domestic tourists note gaps between promoted ideals and actual infrastructure. Furthermore, a policy communication gap exists while government campaigns promote certifications like OCOP, but businesses ignore these in marketing, revealing a disconnect between public-sector sustainability efforts and private-sector implementation.

Implications: There is the disconnect between policy promotion and private-sector implementation in the Mekong Delta's agritourism, risking duplicated efforts and greenwashing. Future research should expand stakeholder interviews, include local media, and compare ASEAN agritourism markets to assess if similar sustainability communication gaps persist regionally.

KEYWORDS

sustainability narratives, sustainable communication and advertising, policy implementation gap, Mekong Delta, greenwashing, green fantasies, agritourism communication

1 Introduction

Sustainable communication has become a critical component of tourism development, central to building consumer trust and ensuring long-term sector viability (Fianto and Andrianto, 2022; Bogren and Sörensson, 2021). Within this broader field, agritourism emerges as a sector where sustainability claims are particularly prominent (Ciolac et al., 2021; Karampela et al., 2021; Ndhlovu and Dube, 2024), often leveraging narratives of authenticity

(Do and Nguyen, 2025; Martinus et al., 2024; Andéhn and L'Espoir Decosta, 2021), environmental stewardship (Peroff et al., 2022; Wen-Ta, 2025; Bhatta et al., 2025), and community benefit (Chassang et al., 2024; Kipkorir et al., 2022; Zvavahera and Chigora, 2023).

The Mekong Delta of Vietnam, with its vast rice fields, fruit orchards, and intricate river networks, represents a prime location for agritourism development (Cuong and Binh, 2022; Quang et al., 2024; Gia, 2021). The potential of this region is widely recognized, offering unique experiences from Cao Lãnh mango picking to exploring the Sa Đéc flower gardens and U Minh Thượng wetlands (Cuong and Binh, 2022; Phuong, 2019). Acknowledging this potential, the Vietnamese government has moved to systematize and promote rural tourism through initiatives like Decision 922/QĐ-TTg (2021–2025), which has contributed to significant growth, evidenced by 52 million visitors and 62 trillion VND (approximately $2.5 billion) in revenue in 2024 (TTXVN, 2024).

Consequently, promotional materials from both government bodies and tourism businesses consistently frame Mekong Delta agritourism using "green" or "community-based" terminology (Trang and Loc, 2022; Gia, 2021; Cuong and Binh, 2022). This aligns with a global trend in tourism marketing where sustainability is a powerful branding tool (Nascimento and Loureiro, 2024; Aman et al., 2024).

However, this rapid, policy-driven growth raises critical questions about the alignment between promotional rhetoric and on-the-ground realities. While existing research has effectively documented the economic metrics of growth (Zvavahera and Chigora, 2023; Arru et al., 2021) and the content of official policies (Roslina et al., 2022; Dsouza et al., 2024), a significant gap remains in understanding the discursive dynamics of sustainability in this context. Specifically, prior studies have two key limitations.

First, they often focus on a single perspective, either the government's policy statements (Dsouza et al., 2024; Roslina et al., 2022) or the businesses' promotions (Miller et al., 2023; Fanelli, 2022), without systematically comparing these narratives against each other and against the experiences reflected in media and tourist perceptions.

Second, while the concept of "greenwashing" is well-studied in the context of hospitality industry (Majeed and Kim, 2023; Brañes et al., 2025; Bovsh and Rasulova, 2025), there is a lack of research on the more subtle and nuanced discursive strategies that might be employed in agritourism in a developing region. The potential for a disconnect between the idyllic "green fantasies" sold to tourists and their actual experiences remains underexplored (Td, 2025; Quang et al., 2024; Nguyen and Lan Ngo, 2022). This gap is crucial because misaligned communication can lead to tourist dissatisfaction (Tao, 2025), damage the brand (Liu and Tang, 2023; Tu et al., 2024; Santos et al., 2024), and ultimately undermine the genuine goals of sustainable development.

To address this gap, this study investigates how sustainability is communicatively framed across three key stakeholder channels: (1) governmental communications and policy documents, (2) tourism company promotions, and (3) mass media narratives. By conducting a comparative analysis of these discourses, this research aims to answer the following questions:

- RQ 1: How do local governments, businesses, and tourists frame eco-sustainability agritourism in the Mekong Delta?
- RQ 2: How do tourist reviews of Mekong Delta agritourism portray experiences related to eco-sustainability?

- RQ 3: What and how are environmental sustainability initiatives portrayed on governmental websites, tourism company promotions, and in mass media?

The findings will provide a nuanced understanding of the communication ecosystem surrounding agritourism in the Mekong Delta. Ultimately, this research contributes to the academic discourse on sustainable tourism governance by highlighting the role of multi-stakeholder communication in either facilitating or hindering authentic sustainability practices. For policymakers and businesses, it offers actionable insights to bridge communication gaps and align branding with tangible, responsible outcomes.

2 Literature review

2.1 Green agritourism: concepts and policy context

Agritourism represents a specialized form of rural tourism intrinsically linked to operational agricultural enterprises (Ammirato et al., 2020; Phillip et al., 2010). It is formally characterized by three essential elements: (1) being situated on a working farm, (2) offering direct or indirect participation in agricultural activities, and (3) maintaining an authentic connection to the farm's core operations (Ammirato et al., 2020; Barbieri, 2019). Green agritourism elevates this concept by integrating principles of sustainability, aiming to protect natural and cultural heritage while enhancing the socio-economic wellbeing of rural areas (Gutkevych and Haba, 2020; Özgürel et al., 2023). It combines ecotourism's focus on nature-based experiences and environmental protection with agritourism's immersion in rural culture and farm-based activities (Özgürel et al., 2023).

The development of green agritourism in Vietnam's Mekong Delta is shaped by a national policy framework that prioritizes its role in sustainable rural development. Key milestones include Resolution 26-NQ/TW (Central Executive Committee, 2008), which linked agricultural modernization to tourism potential, and the One Commune One Product (OCOP) program, which certifies and promotes local agritourism products (Ministry of Science and Technology, 2019). These policies aim to foster models such as eco-friendly shrimp farming, orchard tours, and cultural experiences, with an emphasis on climate resilience, community benefit, and aligning with Sustainable Development Goals (Trang and Loc, 2022; Gia, 2021; Td, 2025). However, a critical challenge persists in implementation, with studies noting a gap between policy vision and ground-level practice, often due to fragmented stakeholder understanding and engagement processes (Hoa, 2020). This context of ambitious policy goals alongside implementation challenges sets the stage for analyzing how sustainability is communicated in practice.

2.2 Sustainability communication: from greenwashing to green fantasies in marketing and tourism discourse

This study positions its analysis at the intersection of tourism studies and marketing communication theory. While the phenomena

of greenwashing and green fantasies are observed in tourism, their mechanisms are deeply rooted in marketing and advertising strategies designed to influence consumer perception.

2.2.1 Greenwashing as deceptive marketing

Greenwashing is fundamentally a marketing communication strategy where companies deliberately misrepresent their environmental performance (Feghali et al., 2025). From a marketing perspective, it is a form of deceptive advertising that exploits the growing consumer demand for sustainable products (Parguel et al., 2015; Parguel and Johnson, 2021). In the hospitality and tourism industry, this manifests through vague or unsubstantiated claims, fraudulent eco-certifications, or emphasizing minor green initiatives while overshadowing larger unsustainable practices (Abeyratne and Arachchi, 2022; Garcia and Vargas, 2024). This practice erodes brand trust and damages destination reputation, representing a significant failure in ethical marketing communication (Chen and Chang, 2013).

2.2.2 Green fantasies as symbolic branding

A related but distinct concept, "green fantasies," can be understood through the lens of symbolic consumption and branding (Fletcher and Rammelt, 2017; Dang, 2023; Macintyre and Foale, 2005). Rather than making overtly false claims (greenwashing), this approach involves the careful construction of a brand image that romanticizes nature (Macintyre and Foale, 2005; Dang, 2023). It leverages what marketing scholars refer to as the *"romantic ethic,"* a taste for novelty and a supply of *"original"* cultural products, shaping consumer desires and behavior (Holbrook, 1997; Campbell, 2018). In tourism marketing, this translates to curated imagery and narratives that present destinations as pristine, untouched paradises, systematically omitting the complex socio-ecological realities (Macintyre and Foale, 2005; Dang, 2023). This strategy commodifies nature into a symbolic product, a *"dream"* or *"escape,"* that fulfills a tourist's desire for existential authenticity rather than providing transparent information about sustainability practices (Dang, 2023).

2.2.3 Distinction and focus

While greenwashing involves leveraging the *"eco"* label as a marketing angle to create a superficial appearance of sustainability, while effectively engaging in practices that may contradict accepted standards (Self et al., 2010; Antari and Connell, 2021), green fantasy is primarily an act of omission and selective emphasis (Dang, 2023; Macintyre and Foale, 2005; Fletcher and Rammelt, 2017; Yannis, 1997). Both strategies undermine authentic sustainability, but through different communicative mechanisms: one violates truth-in-advertising principles, while the other creates a potent but potentially misleading brand myth (Macintyre and Foale, 2005). This study focuses on the phenomenon of *"green fantasies"* as it seeks to analyze the framing and narrative construction of agritourism across media sources in Vietnam, where such symbolic branding is prevalent yet under-examined from a critical marketing perspective.

2.3 Theoretical framework: an integrated CDA, RTA, and CL approach for analyzing sustainability frames

This study employs an integrated theoretical framework combining Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA), Reflexive Thematic Analysis (RTA), and Corpus Linguistics (CL). The rationale for this methodological triangulation is to facilitate a comprehensive, multi-layered investigation into the framing of eco-sustainability across different stakeholder voices in Mekong Delta agritourism (Figure 1). This framework is critically designed so that each method directly addresses specific dimensions of our research questions, and their synergy provides a more robust analysis than any single approach could achieve.

CL is the primary tool to answer the "what" (Alali et al., 2024; Collins, 2019; Rahmani et al., 2016). By analyzing a large corpus of text from government websites, business promotions, and media, CL objectively identifies the most frequent terms, keywords, and collocations related to sustainability initiatives (Cenni and Goethals,

FIGURE 1
Proposed framework.
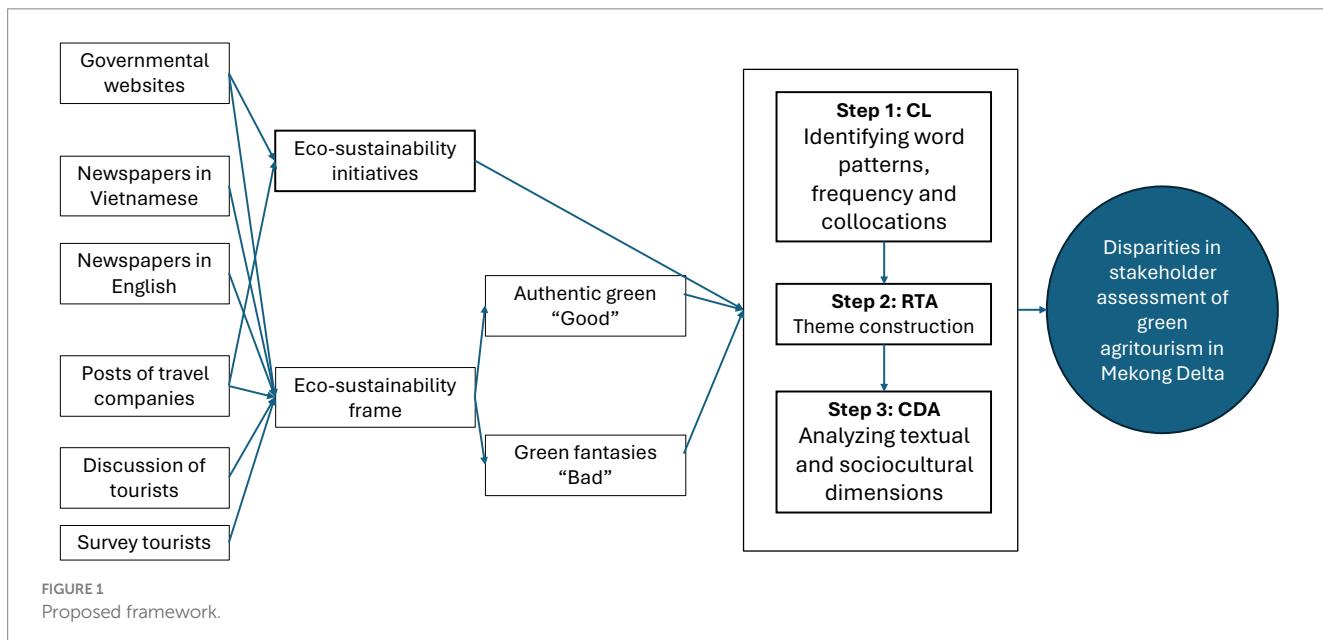
2020; Lazzeretti, 2021; Rahmani et al., 2016). This quantitative mapping reveals the overarching landscape of portrayed initiatives, highlighting their prevalence and basic linguistic characteristics (Alali et al., 2024; Collins, 2019; Rahmani et al., 2016). However, CL alone cannot deeply interpret the *"how"* of the discursive strategies and narrative framing used in these portrayals (Rahmani et al., 2016; Alali et al., 2024).

RTA provides the qualitative, interpretive depth to address the *"how"* (Braun and Clarke, 2019; Byrne, 2022). RTA moves beyond CL's quantitative map to inductively analyze the underlying themes and frames used by these stakeholders (Braun and Clarke, 2019; Byrne, 2022). It identifies patterns of shared meaning, such as a *"development frame"* in government texts or a *"romantic escape frame"* in business promotions (Braun and Clarke, 2019; Byrne, 2022). RTA capture the nuanced, subjective, and emotional language of tourist experiences (Marquesa and Williams, 2005; Aarabe et al., 2025). It allows for a rich interpretation of how tourists themselves frame sustainability through their stories of authenticity, disappointment, or connection (Byrne, 2022). RTA thus interprets the discursive construction of frames and experiences, but it does not focused on critically interrogating power structures (Udayanga, 2025).

CDA, specifically Fairclough's three-dimensional model, provides the critical lens to explain the findings from CL and RTA (Li et al., 2018; Jabeen et al., 2022; Wang and Lei, 2023; Feighery, 2006). It answers the underlying *"why"* behind the *"how."* CDA interrogates how the frames identified by RTA are shaped by ideological interests and power relations, such as the drive for market commodification. Furthermore, CDA explains how the portrayal of initiatives on government websites is not neutral information but a discursive practice that reflects specific policy priorities and power. It connects the textual features (description) and discursive practices (interpretation) to the wider sociocultural and political context (explanation), revealing why certain sustainability narratives become dominant while others are marginalized (Bernardi, 2019; Jin et al., 2024; Lyon et al., 2017).

The power of this framework lies in the sequential, complementary workflow of its components (Figure 1). Corpus Linguistics (CL) first maps prominent keywords and themes across the dataset, objectively establishing what is being communicated (addressing RQ3). Reflexive Thematic Analysis (RTA) then builds on this foundation to interpret how sustainability is framed by stakeholders and experienced by tourists (addressing RQ1 and RQ2), providing qualitative depth. Finally, Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) critically interrogates these frames to explain why these specific narratives exist, revealing the underlying ideologies and power dynamics they reinforce or challenge (synthesizing RQ1 and RQ3). This triangulation ensures the findings are not merely descriptive but explanatory, balancing quantitative breadth (CL) with qualitative depth (RTA) and critical rigor (CDA).

3 Methodology

3.1 Data collection

This study utilizes a multi-pronged approach to data collection, drawing from four distinct sources about agritourism

communication in the Mekong Delta (Table 1). The selection of these sources, including governmental websites, tourism company promotions, mass media, and tourist reviews, was based on their role as primary information channels for both providers and consumers of agritourism services. The studies were conducted in accordance with the local legislation and institutional requirements. The participants provided their written informed consent to participate in this study.

3.1.1 Governmental websites

To understand the official framing of agritourism, promotional text was collected from the official websites of provincial governments in the Mekong Delta region. While a total of 13 provincial websites were initially identified, five were found to be inactive during the initial collection period on May 20, 2025. A follow-up attempts 1 week later confirmed these websites were still non-operational. Consequently, the final dataset for this source was limited to the remaining eight active provincial websites.

3.1.2 Tourism company promotions

Given that some agritourism businesses operate exclusively on social media platforms like Facebook without a dedicated website, this study collected promotional materials from both official company websites and their primary social media pages. This approach ensures a more complete representation of how businesses, including farm stays, market their services across different online platforms.

3.1.3 Mass media

Data from mass media was sourced from two distinct channels to capture both domestic and international perspectives.

(1) Vietnamese mainstream media: Articles were collected directly from the official websites of major Vietnamese newspapers by searching for the keyword "du lịch nông nghiệp" (agritourism).
(2) English mainstream media: A similar search strategy was employed, using search engines, keyword "agritourism," to identify articles about agritourism in the Mekong Delta from major English-language news outlets.

For both sources, the analysis was limited to articles published between January 1, 2020, and January 1, 2025, to ensure temporal relevance.

3.1.4 Tourist reviews

Tourist perspectives were captured from two different sources to account for varying consumption habits among international and domestic tourists.

(1) International Tourists: Data was collected from 61 online discussions on two social media platforms widely used by international travelers to share their experiences in the Mekong Delta.
(2) Domestic Tourists: Due to the limited availability of detailed social media reviews from Vietnamese tourists, a survey was conducted with 176 respondents to gather information about their agritourism experiences. All of these tourists get the

TABLE 1 A detailed description of the specific sources for each category.

Type of stakeholders	Name	Link	Number of units
Vietnamese Media	TuoiTre	https://tuoitre.vn/	6
	ThanhNien	https://thanhnien.vn/	2
	VietnamNet	https://vietnamnet.vn/	8
	VNExpress	https://vnexpress.net/	5
International Outlets	Vietnan News	https://vietnamnews.vn	16
	Vietnam Investment Review	https://vir.com.vn	1
	VietnamPlus	https://vietnamplus.vn	1
	Nhandan	https://en.nhandan.vn	1
	National Geographic	https://www.nationalgeographic.com	1
International tourist	Reddit	https://www.reddit.com/	45
	Tripadvisor	https://www.tripadvisor.com	13
Domestic tourists	Survey		176
Provincial website	An Giang	http://checkinangiang.vn	2
	Bạc Liêu	https://dulich.baclieu.gov.vn/	0
	Bến Tre	https://dulich.bentre.gov.vn/	4
	Cà Mau	https://www.camau.gov.vn/du-lich-1	0
	Đồng Tháp	https://dulich.dongthap.gov.vn/	73
	Hậu Giang	https://dulich.haugiang.gov.vn/	5
	Kiên Giang	https://www.kiengiangtourist.com	0
	Long An	https://svhttdl.longan.gov.vn/	0
	Sóc Trăng	https://soctrangtourism.vn/	0
	Tiền Giang	https://tiengiangtourist.com/	5
	Trà Vinh	https://dulichtravinh.com.vn/	3
	Vĩnh Long	https://vinhlongtourism.vn/	8
	Cần Thơ	https://www.cantho.gov.vn/	11
Companies' introduction	Mekong Silt Ecolodge	https://www.facebook.com/share/p/1CkAHLzQQf/	1
	Viet Mekong Farmstay	https://www.facebook.com/share/p/16jfqJfcJZ/	1
	Taha Travel Agency	https://www.facebook.com/share/p/18NdCiiVFw/	1
	Sac Viet Sg Travel	https://www.facebook.com/share/v/1VFGhvyWat/	1
	Asian Way Travel	https://www.facebook.com/share/p/1EerE6PRyD/	1
	Hanoi Tourism	https://www.facebook.com/share/p/1CedoZzcBS/	1
	Tour Finder Au	https://www.facebook.com/share/p/19Q5yMwTLW/	1
	Rustic Hospitality	https://www.facebook.com/share/p/1ArDR3Gv63/	1
	Du Lịch C2t	https://www.facebook.com/share/p/1GPmhA66TE/	1
	Mekong silt ecolodge	https://mekongsiltecolodge.com.vn/	1
	Viet Mekong Farmstay	https://vnexpress.net/nong-trai-nghi-duong-thuan-thien-viet-mekong-farmstay-4815778.html	1
	Mekong Rustic	https://mekongrustic.com/	1

consent to agree to participate in the survey. They also can withdraw their information from the research at any moment by contacting the lead researcher.

For the survey of domestic tourist, the recruitment channel is online platform. The questionaire was sent to students in a university,

who agreed with doing survey and had experience in visiting Mekong Delta before. The survey respondents were predominantly young adults, with the vast majority (93.8%) falling within the 18–24 age bracket. The sample was also predominantly female (78.5%). In terms of education, most participants held or were pursuing a Bachelor's degree (77.8%). Regarding travel experience, over half of the

respondents (56.3%) were visiting the Mekong Delta for the first time (Table 2).

3.2 Data analysis

Our analytical procedure was designed to move systematically from descriptive quantification to critical interpretation, ensuring each method (CL, RTA, CDA) builds upon the previous to create a layered understanding.

3.2.1 Step 1

Corpus linguistics (CL) for mapping the "what". This study used Sketch Engine to analyze the entire corpus of text, generating frequency lists, key keywords, and collocation patterns for terms like *"sustainable," "eco," "green," "nature,"* and *"community."* This step provided an objective, macroscopic map of what is being said. It answered the "what" in RQ3 by identifying the most prevalent terms and their associated concepts across stakeholder groups. For example, CL revealed that *"nature"* frequently collocated with *"beauty"* and *"peace"* in business promotions, but rarely with *"conservation"* or *"biodiversity."* This quantitative finding served as an empirical anchor-point, pointing to areas requiring deeper qualitative investigation and preventing researcher bias in theme selection.

3.2.2 Step 2

Reflexive thematic analysis (RTA) for interpreting the "how". Using the software Delve, we conducted a hybrid coding process based on a codebook of 14 variables derived from literature. The high inter-rater reliability (Cohen's Kappa = 0.85) ensured consistency. We iteratively analyzed the coded data to identify patterns of meaning, generating themes. This step addressed the *"how"* in RQ1 and RQ2. RTA allowed us to interpret the discursive frames that CL identified. For instance, while CL showed the high frequency of *"nature"* language, RTA interpreted how this language was framed, not as an ecosystem to protect, but as an aesthetic backdrop for tourist consumption. This bridged the gap between raw word counts and their constructed meanings.

3.2.3 Step 3

Critical discourse analysis (CDA) for explaining the "why". In this last step, authors applied Fairclough's three-dimensional model. This study selected representative textual excerpts from the themes generated in Step 2 and analyzed them at the level of text (linguistic choices), discourse practice (production and consumption of the texts), and sociocultural practice (ideological effects). This step provided the critical explanation for the patterns found in Steps 1 and 2, addressing the underlying "why" of RQ1 and RQ3. This moves the analysis from *"this theme exists"* to *"this theme exists because it serves specific power dynamics and ideological interests."*

4 Results

Our integrated analysis reveals an agritourism communication ecosystem characterized not by a unified sustainability narrative, but by profound disconnects. The findings expose a chasm between substantive policy and market-driven fantasy, and between coordinated regional development and fragmented, competitive promotion.

4.1 The *"Green fantasy"* frame (for RQ1)

Quantitative analysis reveals a systemic imbalance in communication. Analysis of promotional content from tourism companies and farm stays reveals significant indicators of *"green fantasies."* The emphasis is on the tranquility and aesthetic appeal of rural life, with Romantic Escapism and Photo-Tourism both present in 43% of the content. These are often framed as a unique feature of agritourism in the Mekong Delta. The information is predominantly positive (79%) and focuses on enjoyable, experiential activities for visitors, such as *"experiencing river activities in the garden/orchard"* or *"Visitors can participate in agricultural experiential activities such as picking fruit, tending to the garden."*

In the promotional materials of companies, the language is structured to evoke a *"green fantasy"* feeling. One of the key indicators is the use of romanticized and mystified language to describe nature. For example, phrases like *"… forest - a green labyrinth… a magical escape into nature… a peaceful paradise… the green seems endless."* utilize metaphors (*"labyrinth," "paradise"*) and evocative adjectives (*"magical," "peaceful," "endless"*) to transform a forest into a fairy-tale world, detached from reality. Another example is *"The Green Fairyland in the Mekong Delta,"* which strongly affirms the fantastical and wondrous nature of the location. The language is also constructed to create the feeling of escaping reality. For instance, *"…escape the hustle and bustle of city life…"* This narrative establishes a binary opposition between the *"noisy, hectic city"* and the *"peaceful Mekong*

TABLE 2 Profile of survey participants (*N* = 176).

Characteristic	Response options	Count	Percentage (%)
Age	18–24	165	93.8
	25–34	7	4.0
	Under 18	3	1.7
	35–44	1	0.6
Gender	Female	139	78.5
	Male	35	19.8
	Prefer not to say	2	1.1
Education level	Bachelor's (or current student)	137	77.8
	Vocational/College	14	8.0
	Prefer not to say	19	10.8
	Secondary school or below	6	3.4
Previous visits to Mekong Delta	First time	99	56.3
	2–3 times	36	20.5
	More than 5 times	29	16.5
	4–5 times	12	6.8

Delta," turning the destination into an escape route. Another example is *"…find peace in the orchard region?… check-in 'live virtually' with the beautiful natural scenery."* The language associated with social media, *"live virtually,"* shows that the landscape is primarily created for photography and self-presentation, rather than for an authentic experience. Furthermore, the simple life in rural areas is also romanticized through statements like *"…a simple life is the most complete happiness."* This narrative frames the *"simplicity"* of rural life as the premise for happiness, without mentioning the accompanying material hardships.

However, in promotional content, Conservation Actions are rarely featured (21%). Perhaps most notably, there is zero information on third-party certifications, which is a key concern related to green fantasies. Furthermore, in the mass media, although Third-Party Certifications were present (41%), this low percentage suggests a limited visibility of verified eco-labels.

This disparity is not a simple omission but the core of a discursive strategy. The "green fantasy" is constructed through an overwhelming emphasis on aesthetic experience, lyrical descriptions of natural beauty, from *"emerald-green waterways"* and *"lush green natural setting"* to feelings of serenity like a *"peaceful paradise"* or *"a fresh and relaxing atmosphere"* which actively displaces narratives of verifiable action. This framing commodifies nature as a backdrop for consumption, aligning with a market logic that prioritizes brand image over ecological accountability. The near-zero mention of certifications by businesses is a particularly stark indicator of this preference for image over substantiation.

4.2 The tourist as critical voice (for RQ2)

Thematic analysis of tourist reviews uncovers a theme absent from official promotions, which is critical voice. International tourists frequently described experiences as a *"staged set of experiences"* or a *"tourist trap,"* with one reviewer lamenting a trip that involved too much traffic and a prefabricated sequence of activities: *"A day trip to the Mekong Delta most often means a lot of time in traffic and then visiting a very staged set of experiences- snake/snake wine/fruit/fruit wine/coconut/coconut candy/rice/pop rice/rice paper/rice noodles/ elephant ear fish for lunch etc."* They also raised complaints about issues such as waste and noise pollution (6 mentions). Examples of these included comments like, *"the one sad thing about the Mekong is that there is a lot of trash thrown in the river polluting it and making it a bit less picturesque,"* and *"The floating market was a canoe trip through garbage."* Other reviews specifically mentioned noise, stating *"Noise and pollution in Can Tho,"* and *"Vietnam ain't a quiet place…"* Meanwhile, domestic tourists complaints about environmental issues, specifically hygiene. Several reviews noted a discrepancy between online promotions and reality, with comments such as, *"Media advertisements look clean, but it's a bit dirty in reality"* and *"Many images in the media about facilities (like WCs, sanitation) are not true to reality."* Domestic tourists also complained about a lack of adequate infrastructure, with some reviewers pointing out a need for solutions to help visitors cope with the heat or simply stating that *"there are not enough amenities when you want to visit tourist areas."*

Tourist reviews function as a crucial site of discursive resistance. They actively negotiate and challenge the dominant *"green fantasy"* promoted by businesses and, to some extent, the media. This critical

voice exposes the fragility of the fantasy narrative and reveals a consumer demand for authenticity that the current market offerings fail to meet. The presence of this critique suggests that the *"green fantasy"* strategy is potentially unsustainable, risking brand erosion through disappointed expectations.

4.3 The policy-practice sensation divide (for RQ3)

Corpus Linguistics reveals a clear lexical divide between stakeholders. Government websites are dominated by terms on govermental website, an analysis of word frequency (Table 3) shows that the terms *"du lịch xanh"* (Green Tourism, 18) and *"tăng trưởng xanh"* (Green Growth, 14), the presence of technology-related elements is more frequent (54%) on governmental websites (Figure 2), constructing a technocratic-developmental frame. In stark contrast, business promotions are saturated with words like *"green space," "green nature,"* and *"green living values,"* articulating a hedonic-experiential frame. This is more than a difference in vocabulary but represents a critical communicative failure. The government's top-down, institutional discourse fails to be translated into the operational language of businesses. This creates a vacuum, which businesses fill with the market-friendly "green fantasy." The result is that sustainability policies remain inert, disconnected from the market-facing narratives that actually reach tourists. This divide is empirically confirmed by statistical comparisons (Table 4), which show significant gaps ($p < 0.01$) between government and business communication on key metrics like Initiatives, Eco-Infrastructure, and Third-Party Certifications.

Additionally, the media coverage and government websites reveal a significant absence of private sector involvement in initiatives, particularly in agricultural development solutions. On govermental websites, an interesting finding is that the most frequently mentioned certification is the OCOP (One Commune One Product) standard, such as *"Developing agritourism in connection with OCOP and traditional craft villages,"* and *"72 agritourism destinations associated with OCOP products."* However, there is the absence of mention of the OCOP program in from private sectors. This is particularly significant given that OCOP is a government-led effort to develop a distinct certification framework for agricultural tourism, and it has been widely implemented across the Mekong Delta region (Trang and Tu, 2021). This is an important finding given that the role of the private sector is formally emphasized in official Vietnamese policies (Nguyen et al., 2009; Kokalari and Giang, 2025). This discrepancy highlights a potential gap between top-down policy formulation and its practical implementation within the agricultural tourism sector in Vietnam.

4.4 The illusion of coordination (for RQ3)

While both government and media sources score higher on authentic sustainability indicators than businesses, their communication is marked by a lack of a unified regional narrative. Media coverage and government websites heavily promote local specialties and provincial-level plans, for example, local specialties like *"Cao Lanh mango, Lai Vung pink mandarin, Thap Muoi lotus,"* but there is a notable absence of messaging around inter-provincial

TABLE 3 Collocates of the word "xanh" (green) in different media sources.

News			Websites			Companies		
Collocate	Freq	Score	Collocate	Freq	Score	Collocate	Freq	Score
nông nghiệp xanh (Green Agriculture)	3	10.32	du lịch xanh (Green Tourism)	18	11.55	giá trị sống xanh (Green Living Values)	2	12.41
chuyển đổi xanh (Green Transformation)	2	10.47	tăng trưởng xanh (Green Growth)	14	12.73	không gian xanh (Green Space)	1	11.41
xu hướng xanh (Green Trend)	2	10.19	chuyển đổi xanh (Green Transformation)	7	12.08	thiên nhiên xanh mát (Green Nature)	2	12.41
lá phổi xanh (Green Lung)	1	9.64	góp phần xanh (Green Contribution)	1	9.35	xanh tốt (Green)	1	11.83
sống xanh (Green Living)	1	9.41	trải nghiệm xanh (Green Experience)	1	8.98	xanh của đồng ruộng (Green of the field)	1	11.83
thiên đường xanh (Green Paradise)	1	9.24	làm xanh (Making Green)	1	8.82	xanh hơn nữa (greener)	1	11.67

Keyness score is the statistical significance of a word's frequency in the focus corpus relative to its frequency in the reference corpus.
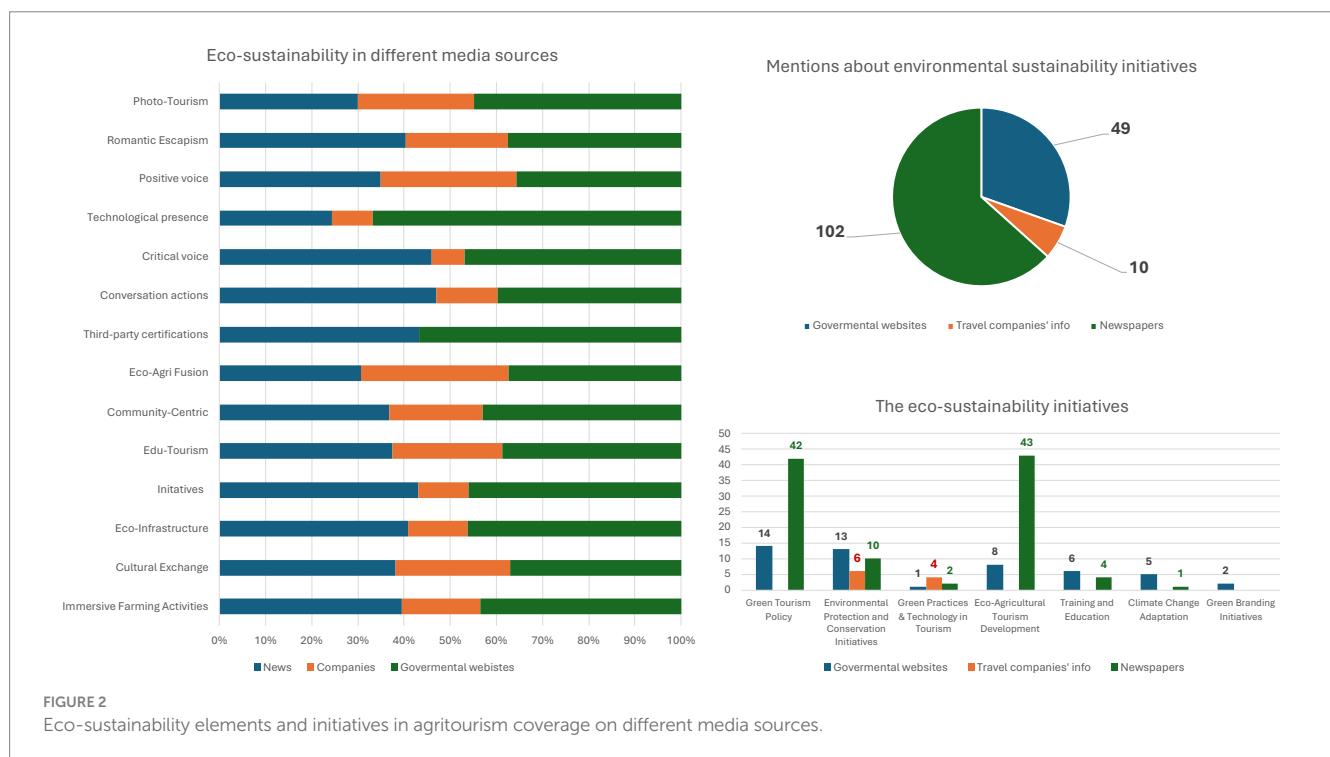
FIGURE 2
Eco-sustainability elements and initiatives in agritourism coverage on different media sources.

collaboration or a shared regional brand identity. Most of the mentioned policies and initiatives focus on the development of a province only. For example, Đồng Tháp province has implemented the *"Plan for Tourism Development in Đồng Tháp Province, 2015–2020, 2021–2025, 2025–2030"* and *"Plan for Tourism Development to Help Build the Image of Đồng Tháp Province, 2023–2025, with a Vision to 2030, with a budget of over 1.008 billion VND."* Similarly, Tây Ninh province introduced the *"Decision No. 2644/QD-UBND on the Plan for Developing the Tourism Cluster in Tây Ninh Province"* and *"Plan No.*

719/KH-UBND on Implementing the Tourism Restructuring Project." Sóc Trăng province has also enacted several measures, including *"Resolution No. 05/2020/NQ-HĐND to Support Tourism Development for the Period 2020–2025,"* the *"Project 'Overall Development of Sóc Trăng Province's Tourism 2021–2025, with a Vision to 2035″,* and the *"Project Nga Nam Floating Market Cultural and Tourism Village."*

This parochial focus reinforces the *"tragedy of the commons"* in tourism branding. Each province acts rationally in its own interest by promoting its unique assets, but the collective outcome is a

TABLE 4 Comparison of green agritourism indicators across companies, newspapers, and governmental websites.

Sub-themes	Companies	News	Pearson Chi-Square value	Asymptotic significance (2-sided)	Exact Sig. (2-sided)	Exact Sig. (1-sided)
Eco-infrastructure	30.8%	85.9%	19.092[a]	0.000	0.000	0.000
Immersive farming activities	23.1%	73.2%	11.479[a]	0.001	0.001	0.001
Initiatives	23.1%	78.2%	14.589[a]	0.000	0.000	0.000
Third-party certifications	0.0%	41.4%	7.531[a]	0.006	0.008	0.005
Critical voice	7.7%	64.0%	10.968[a]	0.001	0.001	0.001

Sub-themes	Companies	Government websites	Pearson Chi-Square value	Asymptotic significance (2-sided)	Exact Sig. (2-sided)	Exact Sig. (1-sided)
Immersive farming activities	30.8%	92.9%	38.213[a]	0.000	0.000	0.000
Eco-infrastructure	23.1%	78.6%	18.116[a]	0.000	0.000	0.000
initiatives	23.1%	92.9%	46.013[a]	0.000	0.000	0.000
Community-centric	46.2%	92.9%	24.059[a]	0.000	0.000	0.000
Third-party certifications	0.0%	55.4%	14.279[a]	0.000	0.000	0.000
Critical voice	7.7%	48.2%	7.762[a]	0.005	0.006	0.004
Technological presence	7.7%	54.5%	10.193[a]	0.001	0.002	0.001
Photo-tourism	38.5%	77.7%	9.220[a]	0.002	0.005	0.005

[a]The Chi-Square assumption regarding minimum expected cell count was met, as 0% of cells had an expected count less than 5.

fragmented and confusing brand identity for the Mekong Delta. This failure to present a collaborative front, despite policy rhetoric about regional linkage, underscores a fundamental governance challenge. It reveals a system where administrative boundaries continue to trump a cohesive regional vision, ultimately diminishing the region's overall competitiveness.

4.5 The abstraction of solutions (for RQ3)

A critical finding across data sources is the treatment of serious environmental issues. As illustrated in Figure 2, media outlets demonstrated the highest frequency of mentions regarding these initiatives (102 mentions) among the three information sources analyzed. A more detailed examination reveals that newspapers extensively cover the Green Tourism Policy (43 mentions). Content analysis of these articles indicates that the Vietnamese government is actively promoting ecotourism integrated with agriculture, attracting international investment, and prioritizing climate change adaptation. For instance, some articles note that "*Government announced plans to develop agricultural hubs in the delta with specialised farming zones and urban areas*" and "*The delta will get priority in development of socio-economic infrastructure, including to adapt to climate change.*" One prominent example is the "*Mekong Green Transformation Alliance Initiative.*" Additionally, the development of agricultural tourism consistently emphasizes high-tech applications and "clean" practices, with stated goals such as "*Promoting clean, high-tech*

agriculture" and "*Developing green tourism products that respect nature and culture.*" Government websites also do acknowledge problems like pollution and the use of agricultural chemicals. For instance, a quote from one site reads: "*Vinh Long has many beautiful golden rice fields stretching as far as the eye can see, but most of the rice is not organic…,*" while another example points out, "*Mostly, tourists have to go to the market area to buy products, but now tourists are very worried about the problem of agricultural chemicals,*" "*the environment is polluted, clean production is not yet the mainstream trend.*" However, these acknowledgments are not coupled with detailed reports on monitoring, enforcement, or concrete remediation plans. The actions restricted in environmental regulations at tourist sites and community awareness campaigns. Examples of these efforts include "*Improve tourism landscapes to be "green, clean, beautiful,*" engage in activities like "*Carrying out cleanup activities, distributing awareness flyers,*" and "*Strictly enforcing environmental protection regulations in historical sites and tourist areas.*"

Similarly, climate change is highlighted on mass media, such as "*Landslides shrinking Ho islet by 30%*" and "*Floating market 'probably will not be here for our kids.*" On webistes, climate change is addressed, for instance, through general directives like "*Responding to climate change within the regional territory.*" However, solutions remain abstract, focusing on broad by policies such as "*Sustainable tourism in the Cù Lao Minh area, ensuring harmony with nature conservation*" and "*Developing wetland tourism in core and buffer zones… to minimize environmental impact*" rather than specific, actionable measures for the tourism sector (Figure 2).

This represents a strategy of nominal inclusion, acknowledging problems to signal awareness, while discursively sidestepping accountability for specific solutions. It keeps communication in the realm of intention and policy, rather than transitioning to the realm of implementation and verifiable outcomes. This allows the "green" label to be maintained without the operational burden of tackling its most difficult contradictions.

5 Discussion

This study set out to investigate how sustainability is communicated across key stakeholder channels in Mekong Delta agritourism. Our analysis reveals an ecosystem characterized not by coordinated action, but by significant disconnects. Two central challenges emerge in the discourse analysis including a persistent lack of inter-provincial cohesion and a critical gap between policy vision and practical implementation. More profoundly, these structural issues create a vacuum filled by a dominant, yet potentially problematic, communicative frame: the "green fantasy." This discussion interprets these findings by engaging in a dialogue with existing theories on collaborative governance, policy implementation, and the commodification of nature.

5.1 The fragmentation of collaboration

Our finding that provinces operate in a competitive, fragmented manner, exemplified by duplicated products like lotus tourism, directly engages with theories of collaborative governance and regional branding. While government policies rhetorically emphasize regional linkage (e.g., Decision 922/QĐ-TTg), the on-the-ground reality sometime reflects a "tragedy of the commons" mindset in tourism (Roopnarine, 2013; Puteh et al., 2024; Yiqing et al., 2025). Each province acts rationally in its own short-term interest by promoting its unique resources, but the collective result is a diluted and less diverse regional portfolio that ultimately diminishes the Mekong Delta's overall competitiveness.

This finding confirms and contextualizes the observations of earlier studies on the region (Thuy et al., 2017; Thao, 2023; Gia, 2021). However, it extends this literature by revealing the communicative dimension of this fragmentation. The lack of a unified narrative across provincial websites and media does not merely indicate an administrative challenge but actively constructs a confusing and incoherent brand identity for the potential tourist. This failure to present a collaborative front underscores a fundamental limitation of top-down, policy-driven tourism development when it is not accompanied by effective mechanisms for horizontal coordination and shared value creation among sub-national entities.

## 5.2 From policy to practice: the gaps in communication

The second key finding, a stark disconnect between government policy communications and business promotions, speaks directly to the extensive literature on the policy implementation gap. Previous studies also observed the same problem in many tourism destinations. For example, in the case study in China, 57.58% of plan elements showed gaps within 3 years (Lai et al., 2006) or in Phuket, causes included limited local consultation and complex, slow, hierarchical approval chains that delayed action and funding in tourism policy (Krutwaysho and Bramwell, 2010). This study, the absence of mentions of specific government support in private sector communications suggesting a breakdown in the communication feedback loop. The government's communication remains predominantly top-down and informational, reflecting a transmission model of communication (S et al., 2016; Davis, 2004) where a message is sent but its reception and adoption are assumed. In contrast, the private sector, driven by market immediacy, operates on a persuasive model (Davis, 2004) focused on aesthetic appeal. This misalignment in communication and interests reveals that policies would remain inert if they are not effectively translated and made relevant to the operational realities and communicative strategies of businesses. Many previous studies also pointed out this problem, such as Lovell et al. (2022) stated that policies remain inert during COVID-19 when communication prioritizes institutional narratives and formalities over actionable clarity, authentic empathy, and feedback loops that make directives relevant to front-line operational work, whether in universities or businesses. Similarly, Tessitore et al. (2023) found that early interactions between firms and public bodies mostly produced misalignment, which makes policy intentions remain inert when not aligned with firms' realities and practices. This chasm between policy rhetoric and market-facing communication poses a significant threat to the scaling of authentic sustainable practices, as businesses are not being effectively enrolled as partners in the policy vision.

5.3 Green fantasy: beyond greenwashing to the romantic commodification of nature

The most significant theoretical contribution of this study lies in identifying and conceptualizing the "green fantasy" narrative prevalent in private and media discourse (Figure 3). While our framework detected a scarcity of concrete, verifiable sustainability information, it was overwhelmed by content emphasizing pristine landscapes, tranquil aesthetics, and romanticized escapes. It is crucial to distinguish this "green fantasy" from classical greenwashing.

- Classical Greenwashing concept in the context of tourism, is described as the deceptive practice whereby operators falsely market their services as environmentally friendly or sustainable, despite their actual operations not aligning with genuine ecotourism principles (Self et al., 2010; Antari and Connell, 2021; Abeyratne and Arachchi, 2022). It is an act of commission and deception.
- Green Fantasy manifests as the marketing of destinations that blend natural and artificial elements to create romanticized escapes focused on enjoyment and aesthetics, rather than genuine environmental education or community benefit (Dang, 2023; Macintyre and Foale, 2005). It does not necessarily lie but rather constructs an idealized reality by omitting the complexities core sustainability principles, environmental challenges, and socio-economic challenges faced by local populations (Dang, 2023;

FIGURE 3
Differences between greenwashing and green fantasy.
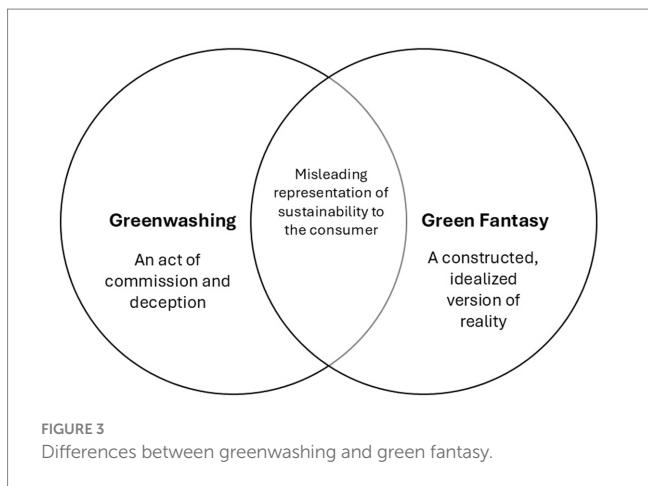
Macintyre and Foale, 2005). It is an act of omission and selective emphasis.

Previous studies argue that "green fantasy" is a specific communicative strategy underpinning the commodification of nature in tourism (Macintyre and Foale, 2005; Dang, 2023; Fletcher and Rammelt, 2017). Nature is not just sold as a place to visit; it is sold as an idea or a dream, an escape from modernity into a prelapsarian, untouched paradise (Dang, 2023; Macintyre and Foale, 2005). This narrative aligns with the search for existential authenticity (Dang, 2023; Macintyre and Foale, 2005), where tourists seek to feel a sense of harmony and "realness" through connection with an idealized natural world. However, when this fantasy is too distant from reality, it can mislead tourists, risking disappointment and undermining authenticity (Macintyre and Foale, 2005; Dang, 2023; Fletcher and Rammelt, 2017). Therefore, "green fantasy" represents a sophisticated form of market-driven communication that, while effective in the short term, may be unsustainable for the long-term brand equity and integrity of Mekong Delta agritourism.

5.4 Theoretical and practical implications

Theoretically, this study moves the conversation beyond identifying greenwashing to analyzing the more nuanced discursive strategies employed in agritourism. By positioning "green fantasy" within theories of commodification and authenticity, this provides a new lens for analyzing sustainability communication in similar contexts globally.

Practically, these findings sound an alarm for all stakeholders, not just the communicators, indicating that the prevailing communicative ecosystem is fundamentally unsustainable. This system is characterized by fragmentation, a significant disconnection between policy and practice, and a critical reliance on "fantasy" or "decoupling" to obscure these inherent flaws (Fletcher and Rammelt, 2017). The theoretical underpinnings of this reliance on fantasy are explained as a "fantasmatic core" within ideological projects, including Green ideology, which serves to create coherence and appeal by concealing systemic lacks and dislocations; this process attributes persistent failures to external intrusions rather than confronting deep-seated structural contradictions (Yannis, 1997). This is compounded by the

disruption of older scientific fantasies, such as a harmonious, predictable nature, which has further dislocated narratives that previously papered over inconsistencies (Yannis, 1997). Practically, this manifests in conservation and ecotourism messaging, which frequently employs idealized, human-free imagery and promises that sideline local realities and core ecological principles, leading to what is termed "green fantasies" and pseudo-ecotourism (Macintyre and Foale, 2005; Dang, 2023). Together, these practices produce fragile narratives that cannot withstand real-world conditions, enabling mismanagement, social and environmental harm, and ultimately deferring systemic failure while risking deeper crises.

The results show that the "green fantasy" creates a significant reality gap between the romanticized promotion and the actual tourist experience. The Mekong Delta's environment and rural life is framed as a backdrop for consumption rather than a living ecosystem. Nature is reduced to a "green labyrinth" or "fairyland," and the "simple life" is romanticized without acknowledging its associated material hardships. This commodification turns the authentic agritourism experience into a superficial product designed for social media, which fails to provide the depth of experience that critical tourists, especially international ones, are seeking. Furthermore, the promotional strategy actively displaces narratives of verifiable action. By overwhelmingly focusing on aesthetic escapism and "Photo-Tourism" while neglecting substantive content and, most tellingly, 0% of Third-Party Certifications in business promotions, the market signals that image is prioritized over ecological accountability. Meanwhile, tourist reviews reveal feelings of being misled, with experiences described as a "staged set of experiences" or a "tourist trap." When domestic tourists note that advertised facilities are "not true to reality" and international tourists encounter pollution and traffic, the result is disappointment and cynicism. Tourist reviews highlight issues that the promotions ignore, which are traffic congestion, waste pollution in the rivers, noise, and a lack of adequate amenities and hygiene facilities. Because the "green fantasy" does not acknowledge these challenges, there is little discursive or market pressure to allocate resources to solve them, allowing the underlying infrastructure and environmental degradation to persist and worsen.

It can be seen that Greenwashing and Green Fantasy are both result in a misleading representation of sustainability to the consumer. They create a gap between the marketed image of a tourism product or destination and its actual environmental and social performance. Both practices prevent tourists from making truly informed decisions and undermine the integrity of genuine ecotourism. However, their differences lie in method of deception, intent, and underlying mechanics. Greenwashing is a d deceptive claim of being "green" while Green Fantasy is a daydream, selling an escape, not a truth, but the omission is so significant that it becomes misleading.

Regarding to the practical implication, the results shows that the Mekong Delta (MKD) agritourism sustainability communication is fragmentation, gaps between policy and practice and "green fantasy." To build a sustainable and authentic communication direction, the MKD requires a fundamental shift, from competition to cooperation, from propaganda to dialogue, and from Green Fantasy to authenticity. By implementing these specific action recommendations, stakeholders in the MKD agritourism sector can collaboratively build a communication ecosystem that is both attractive to tourists and responsible for the future of the region itself (Figure 4).
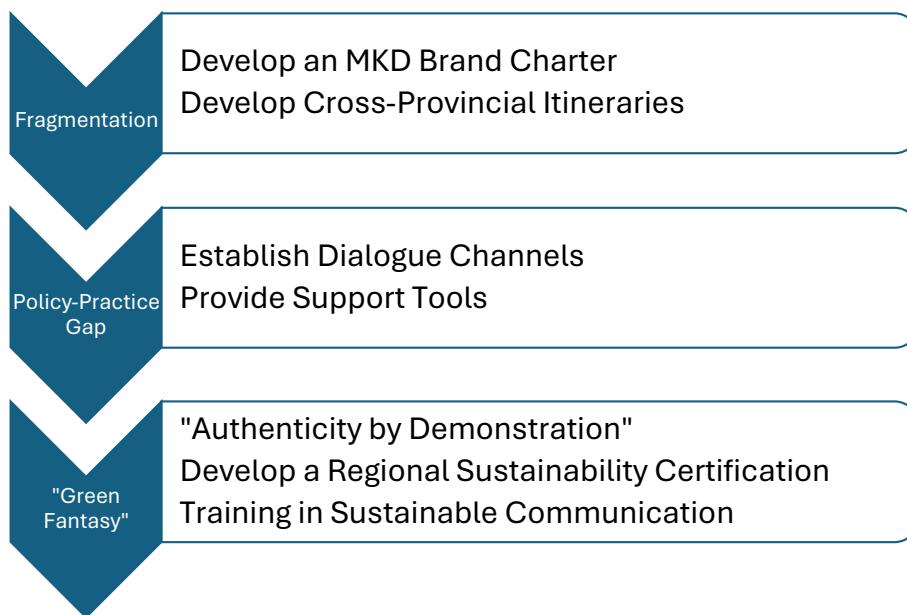
FIGURE 4
Proposed actions for sustainable tourism communication in the Mekong Delta.

In details, to counter fragmentation, the primary strategic objective is to build a unified regional brand, shifting from competition to cooperation. This can be achieved by developing an MKD Brand Charter to define a core narrative with common sustainability messages and a shared visual identity system. Previous studies developed sustainable brand identity communications, which could be a references for MKD brand (Stuart, 2011; Ottman, 2011). Besides that, the tourism companies should create cross-provincial itineraries based on thematic tours and a common regional tourism website or application. Similar solutions can be found in previous studies in China (Li et al., 2020) and at the border of Laos (Deng and Bi, 2025). A Regional Communication Coordination Board, comprising representatives from provincial Departments of Tourism and Culture, tourism associations, and experts, would be the main body responsible for these actions. To bridge the Policy-Practice Gap, the objective is to turn policies into actionable tools by shifting from one-way communication to dialogue, which are essential for successful knowledge exchange (Zhang et al., 2022). Specific recommendations include establishing dialogue channels such as periodic workshops between managers and businesses and an interactive online portal, alongside providing support tools like "communication toolkits" with sample content and transparent case studies (Manfra et al., 2024; Franklin et al., 2022). State management agencies at the provincial and national levels, in coordination with Tourism Associations, would lead this effort. Finally, to move beyond the "Green Fantasy," the strategy must shift from romanticization to authentication, thereby building "Green Authenticity." This involves applying a principle of "Authenticity by Demonstration" by integrating educational elements and sharing authentic farmer stories (Mei et al., 2020; Trauger et al., 2010), developing a clear Regional Sustainability Certification with its associated logo (Junior et al., 2016; White, 2024), and providing training for businesses in sustainable communication and authentic storytelling(Dessart and

Standaert, 2023; Cahyani et al., 2023). The responsibility for implementing these actions falls primarily to the Businesses themselves, supported by Tourism Associations.

5.5 Limitations and further research

The final sample, while comprehensive, presents certain limitations that shape the interpretation of this study's findings. First, five out of 13 provincial websites were non-operational, reducing the sample size and potentially omitting critical regional perspectives. However, because of the provincial merges in Vietnam on 1st July 2025, it is not possible to get the data from these websites after this date, as the outdated information. The inactivity of these websites is, in itself, a meaningful finding. A non-functional or outdated tourism website likely reflects lower institutional priority, funding, and technical capacity for tourism promotion and sustainability communication within that province. Therefore, their exclusion risks creating a sample that over-represents provinces that are already more proactive and better-resourced. However, this inactivity has some bias, including bias in assessing regional disparities and bias in thematic analysis.

(1) Bias in assessing regional disparities: By excluding these five provinces, our findings may present an overly optimistic picture of the region's overall digital sustainability communication. The analysis becomes skewed toward provinces like Đồng Tháp (73 posts), Cần Thơ (11), and Vĩnh Long (8), which are actively communicating. The complete absence of data from the excluded provinces means we cannot comment on whether their communication is weak, non-existent, or simply not facilitated through a digital platform. This gap potentially underestimates the true extent of the regional disparity.

(2) Bias in thematic analysis: The absence of these voices means we lose the potential thematic content from specific geographic and economic contexts. For example, Kiên Giang and Cà Mau are coastal provinces with unique sustainability challenges related to marine ecosystems, coastline erosion, and mangrove forest conservation. Their exclusion means the thematic analysis of sustainability topics is missing critical perspectives on coastal and marine sustainability. Sóc Trăng and Trà Vinh have significant Khmer communities. The exclusion of Sóc Trăng's website, in particular, limits our ability to fully analyze how cultural sustainability and ethnic minority inclusion are communicated across the region. This creates a thematic bias where the findings are more representative of inland, riverine provinces (like Đồng Tháp, Hậu Giang, Tiền Giang) and may not capture the full spectrum of sustainability priorities in the Mekong Delta.

Future research should employ mixed methods, such as interviews with provincial tourism departments, finding alternative official sources for these provinces (e.g., social media pages) to uncover the reasons behind website inactivity and to capture the sustainability narratives of the excluded provinces. Future policy initiatives should prioritize building digital communication capacity in these provinces to ensure a more equitable representation of regional sustainability voices.

Secondly, relying on Facebook and company websites may exclude smaller, less digitally active businesses, skewing data toward more commercialized agritourism providers. This approach, while necessary to capture online promotional materials, likely overlooks a substantial segment of the industry. The sample under-represents smaller, family-run, or hyper-local agritourism businesses that may operate through word-of-mouth, local guides, or direct bookings without a dedicated digital footprint. Therefore, the study provides a valuable snapshot of how the 'visible' and digitally active segment of the market communicates, but it cannot speak to the practices of the 'invisible' majority. To gain a more holistic understanding, future research should employ mixed-methods approaches, such as on-site surveys and interviews with a sample of businesses, including those without an online presence, to assess their actual sustainability practices or engagement with local tourism associations to identify and study businesses that operate through informal networks.

Thirdly, only major Vietnamese speaking newspapers were included in this study, potentially missing regional media sources that could offer different viewpoints. By relying on prominent national and international news outlets, our study captures a broad, macro-level discourse but may miss nuanced, community-specific narratives. The omission of local and regional media means this study lack insight into how sustainability issues are framed and debated at a more granular, local level. Further studies should incorporating these regional news sources in future work to provide a valuable complementary perspective, revealing priorities and concerns that may not filter up to the national press.

Fourth, the domestic tourist survey, though valuable, is skewed toward young, educated, female demographics, limiting the generalizability of domestic tourist perceptions. The next steps could be expanding the number and diversity of respondents. Another next steps could be interviews with stakeholders (farmers, tourists, officials, business owners, journalists) to add deeper insight into the

data from websites and Facebook. For direction focus on the perception of tourists, more survey responses or a wider range of review platforms could be applied next time.

Finally, this study focused exclusively on the agritourism media landscape in the Mekong Delta. Therefore, a key direction for future research is to conduct a comparative analysis across various ASEAN agritourism contexts to see if similar patterns in green communication exist within these diverse markets.

Data availability statement

The datasets presented in this study can be found in online repositories. The names of the repository/repositories and accession number(s) can be found in the article/Supplementary material.

Ethics statement

Ethical approval was not required for the studies involving humans because the survey of domestic tourists ($n = 176$) appears to have: (a) Used voluntary participation with consent; (b) Allowed withdrawal at any time; (c) Avoided sensitive personal questions (focused on tourism experiences rather than private matters). The studies were conducted in accordance with the local legislation and institutional requirements. The participants provided their written informed consent to participate in this study.

Author contributions

MH: Conceptualization, Formal analysis, Methodology, Supervision, Validation, Visualization, Writing – original draft, Writing – review & editing. TM: Conceptualization, Formal analysis, Supervision, Validation, Writing – review & editing. MH: Data curation, Investigation, Resources, Writing – original draft. NN: Data curation, Investigation, Resources, Writing – original draft.

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Appendix: Coding manual

Sub-themes		Green nature	Green fantasies	Coding guidelines
Abbreviate	Descriptions	Portrayals emphasize sustainability, eco-friendliness, authentic rural experiences, and environmental benefits.	Representations that romanticize or exaggerate agritourism, potentially masking commercial or unsustainable practices.	
IFA	Immersive Farming Activities	Presence of the information hands-on experiences (farming, wildlife observation, cultural exchange).	Presence of the information hands-on experiences (farming, wildlife observation, cultural exchange) as profit driven one	
CE	Cultural Exchange	Presence of info on cultural/historical significance	Minimal info on cultural/historical significance	
EI	Eco-Infrastructure	Presence of eco-friendly facilities.	No info on friendly facilities.	
IN	Initiatives	Presence of initiatives from any parties to change or improve the agritourism	No info of initiatives from any parties to change or improve the agritourism	
ET	Edu-Tourism	Tours include educational components (e.g., rescue centers, guided ecology talks).	Minimal info on educational components	
CC	Community-Centric	Communities actively involved in planning, and providing labor/services	Minimal info on the involvement of communities	
EAI	Eco-Agri Fusion	Blends ecotourism (nature/conservation) and agritourism (farm/rural culture).	Minimal info on ecotourism in agritourism	Binary coding 1: presence 0: no presence
TPC	Third-party certifications	The presence of the certification for the quality of agritourism from a third party	No info of the quality of agritourism from a third party	
CA	Conversation actions	The presence of conservation actions such as protecting the bird, cleaning the trash	No info of the conservation actions	
CV	Critical voice	The presence of the information that criticizes the practice of agritourism	No info of the negative side of agritourism	
TP	Technological presence	The presence of technologies in agricultural producing/tourism	No info of the technologies in agricultural producing/tourism	
PV	Positive voice	The balance between positive voice and critical voice	Focus on positive voice only	
RE	Romantic Escapism	Mention nature but not emphasizing romantic escapism from urban life	Emphasizing romantic escapism from urban life	
PT	Photo-Tourism	Minimal info on picturesque checkpoints	Focus on picturesque checkpoints	