

## INTEGRATION OF SUSTAINABLE MESSAGING IN PUBLIC RELATIONS CAMPAIGNS: A STUDY OF SELECTED BANKS IN ABRAKA METROPOLIS

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### ABSTRACT

*This study explores the integration of sustainable messaging in PR campaigns. Sustainability has gained its spot as an important dimension of organizational communications by incorporating it into public relations campaigns. Hinged on the Two-Way Symmetrical Communication Model, the study focuses on identifying effectiveness, as well as alignment between organizational values and sustainable messaging in PR programs, taking into account the ever-changing opinion and current trends concerning eco-friendliness. The study combined qualitative and quantitative methodology in a bid to uncover the best way organizations can link their corporate responsibility communication with sustainability. With a hardcopy of questionnaire, data was gathered purposively from 200 respondents drawn from employees of five banks in Abraka metropolis. Findings show that integration of sustainability in PR campaigns is a strategy that organizations and corporations can leverage on to communicate effectively the mission and vision of the organization to employees to enhance transparency and inclusive culture in the workforce. This study contributes to the existing discourse on the sustainability of public relations, providing valuable information that benefits scholarly analysis and practice. Finally, this research expands knowledge about the contribution of PR towards environmental sustainability and improved corporate image perceptions among stakeholders.*

**KEYWORDS:** Integration, Sustainable, Messaging, Public Relations and Campaigns

## Introduction

There has been an obvious paradigm shift in the way organizations think of and communicate about sustainability over the past few years. With increasing global consciousness about environmental and social concerns, stakeholders such as consumers, investors, and communities have come out to demand that corporations not only engage in green business but effectively communicate this business strategy too. The entrance of public relations into corporate organizations has shown how vital its application is to any business that is striving to stand and remain standing against competitors. (Ivwithren & Umukoro, 2022; Investopedia, 2023). In this regard, public relations (PR) becomes one of the most important instruments that helps link an organization with its audience. Sustainable messaging in PR evolved as firms realized that environmental and social responsibility should not be confined to philanthropy, but has important ramifications for business survival in the long run. In the past, public relations efforts tended to be centered around the promotion of products or services, in today's world people want a more lasting relationship with brands that share their values. Therefore, it requires a deep knowledge of how sustainability integrates into organizational communication for effective communication that is genuine for stakeholders.

In recent times, the concept of sustainability has radically changed to reflect shifts at societal levels. The dynamic character of sustainability alongside fast transformations occurring in the environment calls for investigations. Sustained communication is a technique of public relations campaign used in the banking sector to market ESG practices (Rafiqoh, 2020). Such a form of messaging is much more than traditional marketing that shows the bank's concern with environmental sustainability, ethical business conduct, and positive social impact. Several empirical studies such as that of Abubakri, Ogodo, & Adedowole, (2014), Hashiguchi, (2018), Mehdi, (2022), and Decrinis, Freibichler, Kaiser, Sunstein, & Reisch, (2023) have investigated the role of and how organizations integrate sustainability into their PR practices, exploring the issues, perspectives, and strategies involved. This research on sustainable practice in PR is not only about what happens in practice today in this business but it also looks into possible future ways of adapting communication strategies to new realities associated with increasingly complicated and interdependent international problems. Thus, using four banks in Abraka as a case study of corporate organizations, this study aims to examine the effectiveness of sustainable messaging in PR campaigns while highlighting the role of digital platforms in the process. The background section will also try to establish the link between organizational values and sustainable messaging. The study aims to provide practical guides that will enhance the understanding of why sustainable messaging in PR should be relevant in corporate and institutional communication now as well as in future conditions when stakeholders set new demands on organizations.

## Objectives of the Study

The specific objectives of the study are to:

1. Evaluate the effectiveness of sustainable messaging in PR campaigns
2. Explore the role of digital platforms in sustainable messaging in PR
3. Examine the alignment between organizational values and sustainable messaging

## Research Hypothesis

**H<sub>1</sub>:** There is no significant correlation between the degree of sustainable messaging integration in public relations campaigns and employees' perception of an organization's commitment to sustainability.

**H<sub>2</sub>:** There is no significant relationship between organizational values sustainability within an organization and sustainable messaging in PR campaigns.

## Literature Review

### Sustainable Messaging

Stakeholder integrity in organizations emphasizes sincerity and transparency in sustainability commitments. Integrating messages into all communication systems, including traditional and digital channels, promotes stakeholder inclusion (Sun, Davey, Arunachalam & Cao, 2022). Sustainable PR evolves, demonstrating an organization's sustainability goals and learnings. Trust is built through a longitudinal approach, allowing organizations to succeed even when traditional methods fail. Sustainable communication focuses on environmentally friendly, profit-making practices while respecting workers' rights and society (Grushina, 2017). Organizations must manage relationships with diverse stakeholders in a complex social environment posed by societal and environmental issues (Decrinis, Freibichler, Kaiser, Sunstein, & Reisch, 2023).

### Sustainable Messaging in PR as a Concept

According to Weder (2021), involving stakeholders in organizational decisions is essential in the present sustainability movement, associated with the social license to operate and specific forms of communication in, from, and about organizations with an impact orientation. Public relations (PR) is the practice of managing communication between an organization and its public whose goal is to build positive relationships with stakeholders, influence public opinion, and build a positive image for the organization using communication mechanisms are the tools and strategies to achieve the PR goals (Abubakri, Ogoto, & Adedowole, 2014). In the realm of public relations (PR) communication mechanisms, sustainable messaging is a strategy communication aimed at incorporating both environmental, social, and economic sustainability aspects into organizational (Long, 2019). The concept of sustainable communication aspires to move the idea of sustainability away from just corporate actions and into the realm of dialogue between the organization, its stakeholders, and consumers. However, the message is sustainable as it focuses not only on products and services but also on how organizational values relate to broader societal or environmental issues (Salnikova, Strizhakova, & Coulter, 2022). Sustainable messaging in PR emphasizes an organization's environmental responsibility, social equity, and economic sustainability, promoting harmonious wellness of the environment, individuals, and economic progress. This shift from conventional PR practices involves a responsible environmental approach arising from its evolution. Some key milestones in the evolution of sustainable PR according to Yadav, Kar & Kashiramka, (2021) include:

**Early Emphasis on Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR):** The concept of corporate social responsibility became popular in the mid to late twentieth century (Yevdokimova,

Zamlynskyi, Minakova, Biriuk & Ilina, 2019). PR practice started integrating features of CSR, focusing on the organization's responsibilities not only in terms of profits but also for society and the environment.

**Integration of Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs):** The UN's Millennium goals in 2015 gave birth to new sustainable PR strategies that were geared toward the realization of sustainable development (Long, 2019). Eventually, it led to organizations linking these SDGs with their communication strategy that highlighted their dedication to resolving the world's issues like climate change, poverty, and inequality (Ferretti, 2018).

**Rise of Purpose-Driven Communication:** Communication in the early part of the 21st century was directed towards specific goals. This is where organizations began stressing their core values as well as contributions towards sustainability which they wove in their brand narratives (Abubakri, Ogodo, & Adedowole, 2014). The need for products that reflect their consumers' beliefs forced organizations to emphasize their *raison d'être* rather than just profit.

**Authenticity and Transparency in Communication:** There is an increasing need for genuine openness in communication in recent times. The millennial and Gen Z generations are among the stakeholders who expect organizations to mean what they say. The resultant change and a more analytical outlook towards greenwashing activities have made it crucial for companies to provide valid proof of the sustainability claims they make (Dumitru, Guse, Feleagă, & Mangiuc, 2015).

**Ongoing Adaptation to Global Challenges:** Sustainability PR practice continues to adapt, changing with ever-changing global challenges like climate change, justice matters, and the COVID-19 pandemic (Mehdi, 2022). In today's world, organizations are often expected to take on board these challenges within their communication strategies by showing flexibility and reactivity. However, the emergence of sustainable PR can be viewed as part of the wider trend towards communicating ethical and meaningful corporate messaging (Gillan, Koch & Starks, 2021).

### Role of Digital Platforms in Sustainable PR

The emergence of digital platforms has transformed how businesses interact with their stakeholders. Sustainable PR efforts are now using digital channels, social media, and the web to spread pertinent information, connect to diverse stakeholders, and cultivate a more open debate on sustainability (Kassing & Armstrong, 2022). Sustainable PR harnesses the capabilities of digital technology, data analysis, and online channels to create targeted, measurable, and impactful campaigns in the ever-evolving digital landscape. With the associated benefits of digital, several businesses around the world are seeking to improve the image, visibility, and spread of their brand (Liang, & Ma, 2022; Ivwighren, Igben & Ogwezi, 2023). The role of digital platforms in sustainable Public Relations (PR) has become increasingly crucial in the contemporary communication landscape. Below is an exploration of how organizations leverage digital platforms to effectively communicate and promote their sustainable practices, fostering engagement, transparency, and authenticity through:

**Enhanced Visibility and Reach:** Digital platforms like blogs, social media, and personal websites allow for instantaneous exposure for organizations beyond boundaries and borders (Gretter & Yadav, 2018). These sustainable PR initiatives can be disseminated across borders, thus increasing awareness and participation worldwide. Digital platforms allow companies to send out information on various aspects of their sustainability strategies without delay (Valdiviezo-Abad, Puertas-Hidalgo & Camacho, 2021; Valentini, 2015).

**Real-time Engagement with Stakeholders:** Digital media allows for instant and authentic dialogue among multiple actors. Organizations can understand instantaneous views and opinions about their sustainable actions through commenting, sharing, and liking tools (Yuen, Wang, Wong & Li, 2020). It strengthens the notion of a community since organizations get to respond quickly to any query, concern, or information they can share via this direct interaction which helps build the required transparency and trust.

**Data Analytics for Informed Decision-Making:** It is also possible for organizations to explore the utility of analytical tools that are embedded in digital platforms, which may help organizations understand how effective their sustainable PR has been (Bolton, 2018). The effect of sustainability messages in terms of engagement rates reach, and audience demographics is measured quantitatively using metrics. The use of a data-driven strategy enables organizations to fine-tune their approaches in response to current information and customer choices.

**Crisis Management and Rapid Response:** Sustainable PR requires digital platforms, which function effectively in crisis management, to perform as indispensable instruments (Hashiguchi, 2018). Swift responses by organizations in handling misinformation will protect them from reputation damage. Digital communication enables instantaneous response mechanisms, allowing organizations to publicly state their position in times of crises relating to sustainability.

**Global Collaboration and Partnerships:** Digital platforms help in global joint undertakings on sustainability. Through such connections, organizations can reach out to like-minded organizations and other NGOs all over the world as well as to influencers whose aim will be to amplify their sustainability messages (Yuen, Wang, Wong & Li, 2020). Sustainable campaigns done collaboratively and propagated on digital platforms can result in more attention and support for common sustainability objectives. As much as it can be debated, digital platforms serve very diverse functions in sustainability PR providing organisations with robust vehicles of communication, advocacy, and interaction. Utilizing the dynamic capabilities of those platforms allows companies to genuinely reflect their pledge towards sustainability, engage stakeholders, and be part of the worldwide conversation about ecological and societal issues (Bari, Chimhundu, & Chan, 2022).

### **Alignment Between Organizational Values and Sustainable Messaging**

Public Relations and its authenticity is determined by the alignment of organizational values with the sustainable message. This linkage helps maintain stakeholder relevance, and consequently, builds confidence among the different constituents. It is important in a sustainable PR as scholars point out. In their views, Hawrysz & Maj, (2017), contend that organizational values congruent with communication messages enhance stakeholder



inclusion as it becomes even more effective when it resonates with authentic communication and aligns with organizational beliefs. According to Kim & Ni (2013), such kind of discontent can occur between what the institution claims to be its core values and the real practices. There is a growing focus on realism associated with environmental and social responsibility as organizations seek commitments from consumers who want to know if their money will be used by these groups to protect the environment they live in, as well as society. Further, Gkogkos, (2021) notes that authenticity enhances trust in sustainability issues among stakeholders and improves the validity of organisations' sustainability messages. Commitment to sustaining values is perceived by stakeholders as true, hence stakeholder support and engagement lead to good relations. Such integration ensures that sustainability will be more than just a public relations program, it will constitute part of the basic fabric upon which the organization is founded. Effective sustainable PR hinges on alignment between organizational values and sustainable messaging (Bernal, Edgar & Burnes, 2018).

### Theoretical Frameworks

The Two-Way Symmetrical Communication Model, developed by James Grunig and Todd Hunt, is a communication approach that emphasizes mutual understanding and engagement between organizations and their stakeholders (Rolos, 2020; Pir, 2019). It is particularly relevant in sustainable Public Relations (PR) as it advocates for open dialogue, transparency, and mutually beneficial relationships. The model emphasizes understanding stakeholders' perspectives, values, and concerns, actively listening to diverse voices, and demonstrating transparency and authenticity. It encourages continuous feedback, adaptation initiatives, and interactive improvements to remain responsive to changing stakeholder expectations and sustainability challenges. The model also emphasizes addressing conflicts and building long-term, collaborative relationships, fostering a culture of shared responsibility for sustainability. In essence, the model promotes a more transparent, authentic, and collaborative approach to communication in the context of sustainability (Browning, 2015; Eller, 2015).

### Research Method

This study combines both qualitative and quantitative methods which allows for a comprehensive understanding of the integration of sustainable messaging. Quantitative data gathered from employees of five banks in Abraka metropolis (United Bank for Africa, Zenith, First, Fidelity, and Eco banks) provided measurable insights, while qualitative data from stakeholders, PR professionals, and campaign managers offered in-depth perspectives. For the survey, 200 copies of the questionnaire were structured using the Linkert Scale to gather quantitative data on employees' perceptions, opinions, and experiences regarding sustainable messaging in PR campaigns. 40 copies were distributed to staff of each bank who were selected purposively as respondents and 192 copies were retrieved and analysed. Interviews were conducted with key stakeholders, PR professionals, and campaign managers to gain qualitative insights into the strategies associated with integrating sustainable messaging. For statistical analysis to interpret survey data, identifying patterns, correlations, and significant differences in stakeholders' perceptions of sustainable messaging, Stata 15.0 software was applied. The P-value of less than (<) or greater than (>) 0.05 decides the reject

or failure to reject the hypothesis respectively. Informed consent was obtained from all participants, ensuring transparency regarding the research purpose, procedures, and potential outcomes.

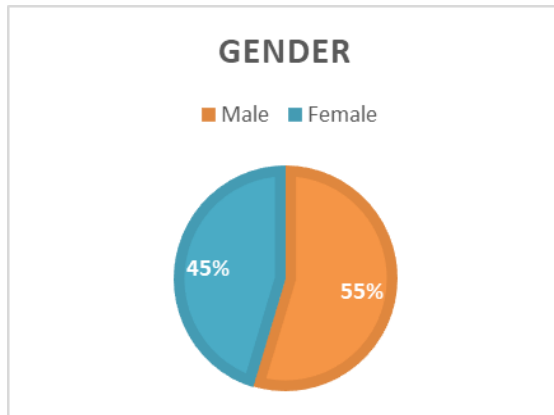
### Data Presentation

**Table 1: QUESTIONNAIRE Presentation**

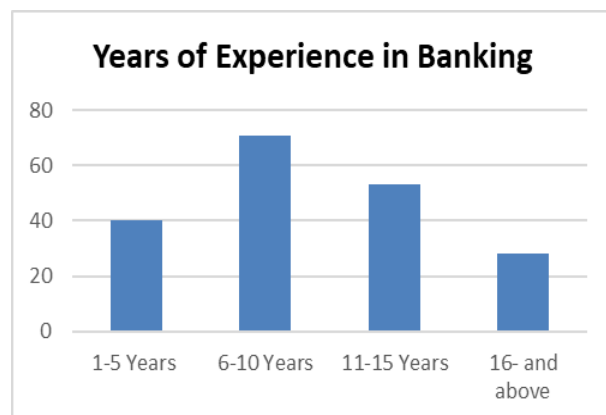
Distributed	200
Retrieved	192
Analysed	192
Difference	8
DIFFERENCE IN PERCENTAGE	2%

### Demographic Data

The variables are presented in pie charts and bar charts to show gender, role in the bank, and years of experience at the bank providing descriptive insight of the sampled respondents. Age and marital status were deliberately not observed by the researcher because all respondents are considered adult employees in a bank and the marital status was considered irrelevant to the needed data. The demographic details are presented below:

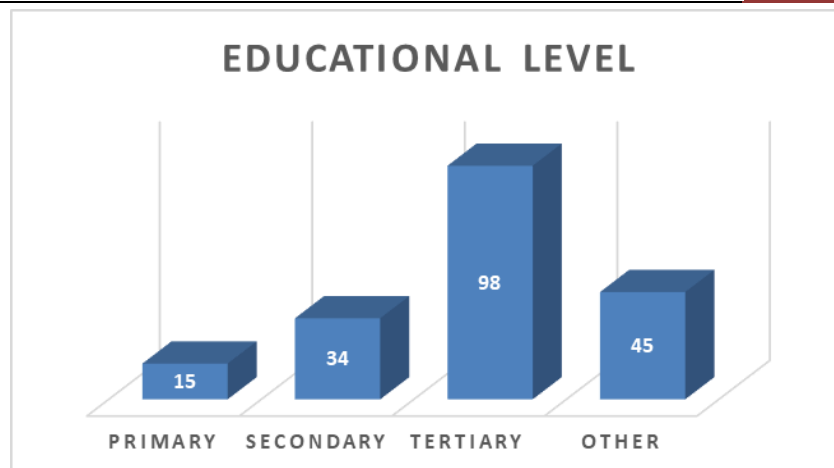


**Figure 1: Gender of Respondents**

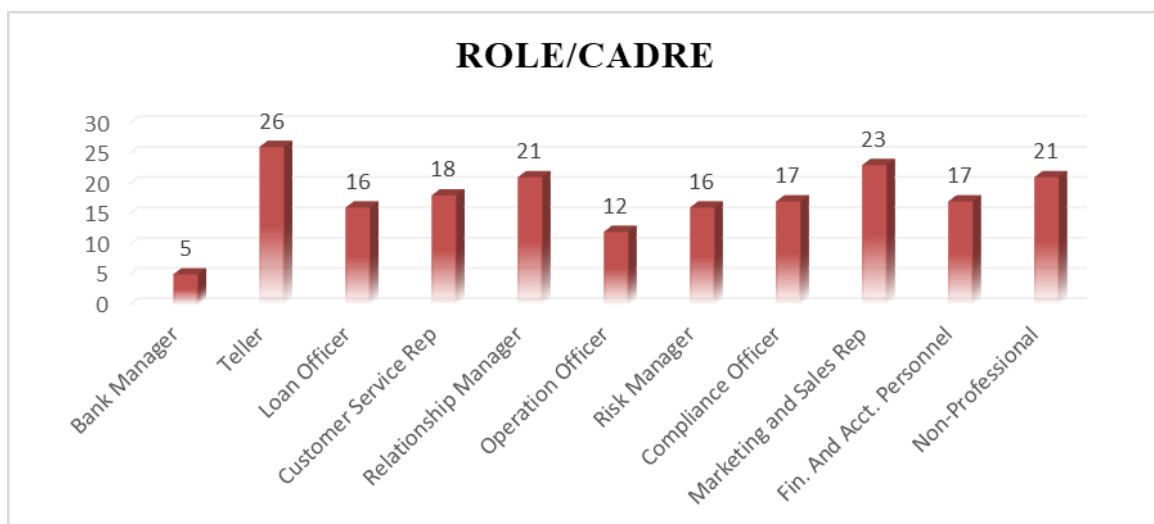


**Figure 2: Years of Experience in Banking**

With a 10% difference, the pie chart above for Figure 1 is a clear indication that the numbers of males are higher at 55% as against females who are 45%. Figure 2 bar chart denotes the years of experience of the respondent. It shows that 37% of the respondents have 6-10 years of banking experience, whereas, about 28% have 11-15 years of experience. 20% have just 1-5 years as against 15% with 16 and above years of experience.

**Figure 3: Educational Level**

The 3-D column bar chart in Figure 3 shows that the bank employees all have formal education of different levels as 51% have tertiary education, 23% have other forms as against 18% with secondary education and 8% primary education.

**Figure 4: A Bar Chart on the work cadre of the respondent in the bank**

The above bar chart in Figure 4 is a description of the different cadre or roles of employees in the banks. It is digitally clear from the above that every cadre of the employee is represented proportionally in the study.



**Thematic Variables****Table 2: Effectiveness of Sustainable Integration of PR Campaigns in Banking (EFFSUSPR)**

S/N	QUESTIONNAIRE ITEMS	SA 5	A 4	NEU 3	SDA 2	DSA 1	TOTAL
1	The integration of sustainable messaging enhances the credibility of public relations campaigns by banks.	61	79	43	7	2	192
2	I am very likely to be engaged with a PR campaign by a bank that effectively integrates sustainable practices.	72	60	45	11	4	192
3	The integration of sustainability in public relations campaigns by banks is essential for addressing environmental concerns.	81	67	22	10	12	192
4	The integration of sustainable messaging positively influences my perception of a bank's commitment to social responsibility.	73	79	19	14	7	192
5	I believe public relations campaigns by banks should prominently feature their commitment to environmental sustainability.	91	75	12	8	6	192
<b>Average</b>		<b>76</b>	<b>72</b>	<b>28</b>	<b>10</b>	<b>6</b>	<b>192</b>

Table 2 visibly shows where the respondents stand on the effectiveness of sustainable integration of PR campaigns in banking. Going by the average, the loudest voice in the opinion given as 76(40%) strongly agree on the effectiveness of sustainable integration of PR campaigns suggesting a total disregard of the 6(3%) who strongly disagree.

**Table 3: Role of Digital Platforms in Sustainable Messaging in PR (RODIGPL)**

S/N	QUESTIONNAIRE ITEMS	SA 5	A 4	NEU 3	SDA 2	DSA 1	TOTAL
6	Digital platforms (social media, corporate websites, etc.) effectively convey a company's sustainability efforts.	84	79	17	9	3	192
7	Social media plays a significant role in disseminating sustainable messaging compared to traditional media.	69	83	26	12	2	192
8	I am more likely to engage with sustainable messaging on digital platforms than through other communication channels.	56	78	28	21	9	192
9	Corporate websites should prominently feature a company's commitment to sustainability.	74	58	44	12	4	192
10	Sustainable messaging on digital platforms influences my perception of a company's environmental and social responsibility.	83	79	19	8	3	192
	<b>Average</b>	<b>73</b>	<b>75</b>	<b>27</b>	<b>12</b>	<b>4</b>	<b>192</b>

Table 3 above was used to highlight the respondent's opinion on the role of digital platforms in sustainable messaging in PR campaigns. On average, it was concluded that the majority of the respondents 75 (39%) strongly agree that the role of digital platforms is huge in sustainable messaging as against just 12 (6%) with contrary opinion`.

**Table 4: Alignment Between Organizational Values and Sustainable Messaging (ALBETORG)**

S/N	QUESTIONNAIRE ITEMS	SA 5	A 4	NEU 3	SDA 2	DSA 1	TOTAL
11	The company's mission and vision are reflected in our sustainable messaging efforts and sustainability.	62	76	49	4	1	192
12	The messaging in external PR campaigns aligns with the actual sustainable practices of the organization.	71	75	38	5	4	192
13	The sustainable messaging in our PR campaigns reflects the core values and principles of our organization.	65	92	18	12	5	192

14	The sustainable messaging in our PR campaigns reflects the core values and principles of our organization.	69	73	26	17	7	192
15	Employees perceive that the company's commitment to sustainability matches the sustainable messaging portrayed externally.	71	77	22	10	12	192
<b>Average</b>		<b>67</b>	<b>79</b>	<b>31</b>	<b>9</b>	<b>6</b>	<b>192</b>

In Table 4, alignment between organizational values and sustainable messaging has a clear position on average as the majority of the respondents 79 (41%) strongly agree in contradiction to 6 (3%) who strongly disagreed.

### Qualitative Data Presentation

Stakeholder and PR Professional insights on how important the integration of sustainable messaging in PR campaigns in banking is from a Stakeholder and PR Professional's perspective. Due to the sampling process, interviews took place over the phone after establishing verbal consent and spanned approximately 25 minutes. The process followed a framework of introductory questions about the interviewee's background, current position, projects relating to sustainable messaging, PR campaign, and perceptions of inclusiveness and transparency shifts in the organizations as a whole. There was no use of an organization or individual names to maintain the anonymity of the participants. The responses are summarized as reflected below:

In this case, transparency and long-term vision are highly regarded, with sustainable messaging being a bonus and critical indicator of a bank's ethics and resilience in the long term. It enables the banks to convey their sustainability effort in an effective manner, which indicates the level of management quality and risk avoidance strategies within those institutions. It is an important consideration for any investing decision. This is a tightrope to walk, more so, in banking whose performance matters most. Other than this, authenticity becomes a concern that can be overcome by refraining from greenwashing and ensuring that the sustainable message matches actual practices. Storytelling was emphasized as an important ingredient of sustainable messaging among stakeholders and PR experts. A focus on narratives depicting how banking programs affect people and nature. This also entailed discussing how to engage and keep customers loyal by involving them in a sustainability discourse. The above-mentioned qualitative findings represent the views of stakeholders, as well as those of the public relations players in the banking arena concerning sustainable messaging. This includes demonstrating the importance of transparent communication storytelling, truthfulness, and sustainability in messaging for different stakeholders and their responses toward business decisions.

**Test of the Hypotheses**

**Hypothesis One- H<sub>1</sub>:** There is no significant correlation between the degree of sustainable messaging integration in public relations campaigns and employees' perception of an organization's commitment to sustainability.

**Table 5: Spearman's Rank Correlation**

Source	Output	Decision
Number of obs	192	Reject
Spearman's rho	0.2970	
Prob >  t	0.0000	

(Computation Output from Stata 15.0, 2023)

Table 5: Result for the significant correlation between the degree of sustainable messaging integration in public relations campaigns and employees' perception of an organization's commitment to sustainability done by measuring the effectiveness of sustainable integration in PR Campaigns in banking (EFFSUSPR) with the role of digital platforms in sustainable messaging in PR (RODIGPL). From the result of the test, the P-value of 0.0000 is less than the level of significance of 0.05, so the null hypothesis is rejected.

**H<sub>2</sub>:** There is no significant relationship between organizational values sustainability within an organization and sustainable messaging in PR campaigns.

**Table 6: Spearman's Rank Correlation**

Source	Output	Decision
Number of obs	192	Reject
Spearman's rho	0.0130	
Prob >  t	0.8579	

(Computation Output from Stata 15.0, 2023)

Table 6: Is the result of a significant relationship between organizational values sustainability within an organization and sustainable messaging in PR campaigns. This was done by measuring the effectiveness of sustainable integration in banking PR campaigns (EFFSUSPR) with alignment between organizational values and sustainable messaging (ALBETORG). Since the P-value of 0.8579 is less than the level of significance of 0.05, the null hypothesis is rejected.

## Discussion/Conclusion

Preliminary findings indicate that co-operate organization engagement in public relations has undertaken various initiatives to sustain development and growth. The positive relationship that exists between sustainable messaging integration in public relations campaigns and employees' perception of an organization's commitment to sustainability as seen in the tested hypothesis affirms the study of Mehdi, (2022) that an organization's sustainability is related to its ability to strike a balance with its environment for opportunities, changes, trends, and risk management. These include different strategies and initiatives such as communication with employment and transparent collaborations with stakeholders. The intersection of sustainable messaging and PR is in line with the study of Abubakri, Ogodo, & Adedowole, (2014) that sustainable messaging is a never-ending commitment by organizations to behave ethically by relating the organization's mission and vision to the workforce and stakeholders to sustain trust and show transparency. Such initiative is in agreement with the two-way Symmetrical Communication Model that emphasizes mutual understanding and engagement between organizations and their stakeholders for it advocates for open dialogue, transparency, and mutually beneficial relationships (Rolos, 2020).

From the second hypothesis tested, the alignment between organizational values sustainability within an organization, and sustainable messaging in PR campaigns was established. This reaffirmed the study of Decrinis, Freibichler, Kaiser, Sunstein, & Reisch, (2023) the application of sustainable messaging strategy as a management practice to promote change in employee behavior for corporate sustainability holds a strong correlation. It further corroborates the findings of Hashiguchi, (2018) that one important factor in the integration and expectation for increased depth of sustainable messaging strategy emerged from the changing demographics of the workforce both in PR campaigns and in practice. Just as previous research shows, employees play a significant role in changing corporate culture by bringing their social causes to the forefront of their work with supported claims that a more socially conscience workforce enhances professional intentions and goals. The qualitative data provided further insights into the effectiveness of these initiatives and their alignment with organizational values of transparency, inclusiveness of all parties, and a stronger bond of trust with all stakeholders.

## Contribution to Knowledge

1. Integration of sustainability in PR campaigns is a strategy that organizations and corporations can leverage to communicate effectively the mission and vision of the organization to employees and enhance transparency and inclusive culture in the workforce.
2. Organizational values sustainability has a strong link with sustainable messaging in PR campaigns that can promote better ethics among employees, enhance the trust of stakeholders, and maintain a positive image within and in the environment of operations.

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