

Research on the practical dilemmas and optimization paths of enterprise communication driven by sustainable development theory

Yi'an Shi

Conservatory of Music, Hainan Normal University, Haikou, China

16630000096@163.com

Abstract. With the in-depth popularization of the concept of sustainable development on a global scale, enterprise communication is facing an urgent demand for transformation from "information disclosure" to "value communication". Using the case analysis method, this paper systematically studies the driving effect and internal logic of the concept of sustainable development on enterprise communication, and analyzes the practical dilemmas in the communication process, such as narrative distortion, lack of two-way communication, and insufficient public empathy. The study finds that current sustainable enterprise communication faces three dilemmas: (1) Narrative distortion, there is a systematic disconnection between the publicity commitments and actual actions; (2) One-way communication, there is a lack of dialogue circulation and interactive feedback with the public; (3) Insufficient empathy, enterprises prefer data-centered rational narratives and grand abstract strategic expressions, and lack the narrative ability to connect with the public's daily life and emotional experience. In response to the above dilemmas, this paper proposes three optimization paths: building a credibility system based on practices, establishing a two-way communication mechanism between enterprises and the public, and enhancing the effect of communication resonance with emotional narratives. The optimization of enterprise sustainable communication is not only a strategic issue, but also a matter of value choice. Only by transforming sustainable development from "marketing rhetoric" to "code of conduct" and upgrading from "compliance disclosure" to "value co-creation" can enterprise communication truly win public trust and realize the deep coupling between the sustainable development concept and corporate social responsibility.

Keywords: enterprise communication, sustainable development concept, two-way communication, public trust

1. Introduction

The concept of sustainable development has evolved from a consensus initiative of the international community to a rigid constraint for enterprise operation. On April 30, 2026, the A-share market welcomed the first round of assessments after the implementation of the mandatory Environmental, Social, and Governance (ESG) disclosure system, and all 430 listed companies subject to mandatory disclosure completed the release

of their 2025 sustainable development reports on schedule¹. This institutional change means that the domestic sustainable development information disclosure of enterprises has officially entered the mandatory standardized stage from the voluntary disclosure stage. While institutional constraints are strengthened, the public's expectations for corporate sustainability responsibility narratives are continuously rising. Overseas survey data shows that more than 70% of the American public believe that large enterprises still have insufficient actions in climate action, globally, 55% of consumers hold a skeptical attitude towards the sustainability-related publicity output by brands [1], and corporate sustainable communication is facing a dual realistic environment of institutional pressure and insufficient public trust.

However, the gradual improvement at the institutional level has not naturally been transformed into the simultaneous improvement of communication efficiency. On the contrary, after the sustainable development report has evolved from an independent choice of enterprises to a mandatory compliance obligation, the corporate communication field presents a structural paradox in which "compliance expansion and credibility attenuation" coexist: enterprises continue to invest resources in the compilation of sustainability reports and brand communication activities, while the audience's trust level in relevant communication content shows a downward trend. This internal tension constitutes the core problem awareness of this paper—under the institutional drive of the sustainable development concept, what is the generation mechanism of the dilemma faced by enterprise communication? How should its optimization path be constructed?

In terms of theoretical context, existing studies mostly focus on the institutional framework and financial effect dimension of ESG information disclosure, and lack sufficient attention to issues such as narrative logic, communication mechanism and audience perception in the communication process. From the practical dimension, typical cases such as Arc'teryx's "Plateau Fireworks" public opinion incident, Shede Spirits' ESG report "greenwashing" controversy, and Apple's environmental advertising trust crisis all show that the main contradiction of current enterprise sustainable development is no longer the lack of sustainable practical behaviors of enterprises, but the failure of high-quality practices to be transformed into effective public cognition, and the frequent distortion and inaccuracy of communication narratives. Therefore, based on the communication perspective, this paper fills the gaps in existing research, systematically analyzes the practical dilemmas of corporate sustainable communication, and provides an academic basis and path reference for the standardized and credible construction of corporate sustainable communication.

2. New features of enterprise communication from the perspective of sustainable development

2.1. Changes in the public's communication behaviors

The popularization of the concept of sustainable development has profoundly changed the information relationship between the public and enterprises. First, the public's information acquisition channels have changed from "single information source" to "multi-dimensional verification". Multiple information subjects, such as social media, third-party rating agencies, and environmental nonprofit organizations, jointly participate in information production. Once there is misrepresentation in corporate sustainable communication, it is very easy to be cross-compared and exposed by multiple sources of information. Second, the public's information processing mode has changed from "passive reception" to "active questioning". A 2024 global survey shows

¹ China Association of Listed Companies. (2026, June 11). Analysis report on 2026 sustainable information disclosure of mandatory disclosure entities.

that 85% of investors believe that greenwashing and misleading publicity in the sustainable field of enterprises have become more prominent than they were five years ago². Third, the public's value appeal has changed from "functional satisfaction" to "value identity". Some consumers are willing to pay a premium for outdoor brands, and their consumption motivation includes the value identity of the natural concept conveyed by the brand, rather than only focusing on the practical functions of the products, when the corporate communication narrative deviates from the actual behavior, the negative emotion generated by the public will be significantly stronger than the impact brought by ordinary false publicity [2].

2.2. Paradigm transformation of enterprise external communication

Driven by the changes in public behaviors, corporate sustainable communication is undergoing multiple paradigm transformations. From the perspective of communication motivation, sustainable disclosure has changed from voluntary choice of enterprises to institutional mandatory constraints, but "communicating for compliance" tends to make the content formalistic [3], from the perspective of communication content, information output has changed from a single sustainable report to differentiated narratives for multiple stakeholders such as investors, consumers and employees, from the perspective of communication channels, the release method has changed from a single official channel to full-platform reach, but the sustainable communication on most corporate official websites is still dominated by one-way information output, the interactive potential of dialogue has not been fully released, and the investment in content management is much higher than the investment in interactivity [4].

3. Practical dilemmas of enterprise communication from the perspective of sustainable development

3.1. Narrative distortion: systematic disconnection between internal actions and external publicity

The most prominent contradiction in current corporate sustainable communication is the systematic deviation between the "green narrative" of external publicity and the actual internal operation actions. Some enterprises equate sustainable communication with compliance-level information packaging, piling up environmental public welfare data and exaggerating carbon reduction effects in ESG reports, but fail to implement corresponding sustainable measures in core links such as production processes and supply chain management, finally forming a dislocation situation where "publicity runs ahead of actions". This kind of "greenwashing" communication cannot build public trust, on the contrary, it will be quickly exposed in the cross-verification of third-party information, directly breaking the long-term accumulated brand credibility of the enterprise [5-8].

3.2. One-way communication: lack of closed-loop feedback mechanism for two-way dialogue

Most enterprises' sustainable communication still stays in the traditional one-way information disclosure stage, taking sustainable reports and official announcements as the only information output carriers, and has not built interactive communication channels for ordinary consumers and the public. Enterprises only complete the compliance action of "I have released the information" but do not establish a feedback loop to receive public

² EY. (2024, December 24). EY 2024 global institutional investor survey: Balancing short-term demands and long-term values. https://www.ey.com/zh_tw/insights/climate-change-sustainability-services/ey-2024-institutional-investor-survey

questions, respond to public concerns, and absorb public suggestions, resulting in the communication content always suspended at the strategic level of the enterprise, unable to reach the real needs of the audience, and finally appearing a communication fault of "enterprises talking to themselves, the public feeling indifferent" [9, 10].

3.3. Insufficient empathy: rational grand narrative is separated from daily emotional scenarios

Most of the current corporate sustainable communication content prefers rational narratives centered on professional ESG data and macro strategic goals, and is accustomed to using abstract expressions such as "annual carbon reduction of XX tons" and "achieving full-chain carbon neutrality", completely ignoring connecting the sustainable development concept with the public's daily life scenarios. This grand narrative separated from individual emotional experience cannot make ordinary audiences perceive the connection between sustainable actions and themselves, it is difficult to arouse the public's emotional resonance and finally makes sustainable communication reduced to an "internal document" that only industry practitioners can understand, unable to realize the value transmission for the general public [11-13].

4. Optimization path for enterprise sustainable communication

4.1. Constructing a credibility system for communication

To resolve narrative distortion, the core lies in bridging the gap between "words" and "actions". Empirical studies have verified that the internationalization of top management teams can inhibit corporate greenwashing behaviors, with its mechanisms including reducing management short-sightedness, enhancing environmental information transparency, and alleviating financing constraints. A trust-oriented corporate culture can further amplify the green governance effect brought by internationalized management teams. This indicates that enterprises should promote the transformation of sustainable development from "symbolic commitments" to "substantial actions" starting from the decision-making level [14].

At the institutional construction level, relevant scholars propose that greenwashing in ESG information disclosure should be incorporated into the regulatory framework of false publicity. Other studies also point out that ESG information disclosure cannot rely solely on voluntary corporate reporting, and strengthened supervision is required to ensure the openness and transparency of public information. Third-party assurance also serves as a critical approach to enhance communication credibility [15].

4.2. Establishing a two-way communication mechanism between enterprises and the public

The transformation from one-way communication to two-way dialogue requires enterprises to truly build a complete dialogue loop. Relevant research suggests that enterprises should adjust their social responsibility communication strategies, and construct an integrated communication system that adapts to the dissemination characteristics of social media platforms [10].

In crisis scenarios, response strategies when facing public doubts are particularly critical. Scholars have summarized the advanced path of corporate crisis public relations, proposing that enterprises should evolve from passive positive responses to value dialogue and institutional construction. Simply using "silence" or "content deletion" to replace communication will only exacerbate the trust crisis. The correct approach is to respond to public concerns in a timely, transparent and responsible manner.

4.3. Enhancing the emotional resonance effect of sustainable communication

The optimization of communication effects requires a shift from "data-driven" to "story-driven". Studies have shown that brand narratives should transform from functional promotion to emotional connection and value transmission, and effectively stimulate the audience's emotional resonance by shaping real characters and constructing life-oriented plots [12].

Scholars have pointed out that brand cultural symbols are the psychological foundation that promotes empathic communication and consensus-building communication activities. Enterprises should upgrade their sustainable communication from "information disclosure" to "value communication", transforming abstract data and commitments into perceptible and empathetic practical practices.

5. Conclusion

From the perspective of communication studies, this paper comprehensively adopts the literature research method and case analysis method to systematically investigate the practical dilemmas and optimization paths of enterprise communication driven by the concept of sustainable development. The research shows that current corporate sustainable communication faces three core dilemmas: narrative distortion, manifested as greenwashing, selective disclosure, and the disconnection between publicity and practice. Enterprises are accustomed to constructing a responsible image in communication, but still prioritize profit at the operational level. This separation between words and actions has seriously eroded the credibility of communication, one-way communication, lacking a dialogue loop and two-way interaction. Enterprises adhere to the traditional "I speak, you listen" model and fail to establish an effective public feedback and dialogue mechanism. Although social media provides technical possibilities for two-way communication, it is mostly used as a publicity megaphone, with insufficient empathy, there is a deviation between narrative expression and the public's emotional cognition. Enterprises prefer data-centered rational narratives and grand abstract strategic expressions, and lack the narrative ability to connect with the public's daily life and emotional experience, making it difficult to trigger real emotional resonance.

In response to the above dilemmas, this paper proposes three optimization paths: build a credibility system based on real practices, bridge narrative distortion by ensuring consistency between words and deeds, introducing third-party assurance, and establishing a normalized management mechanism, so as to reconstruct the credible foundation of communication from the source and improve the transparency of environmental information, establish a two-way communication mechanism between enterprises and the public, realize the transformation from "release" to "dialogue", and adhere to the principles of sincerity, transparency and responsibility in both daily communication and crisis response, enhance the effect of communication resonance through emotional narratives, promote the transformation of narrative modes from "data-driven" to "story-driven", from "grand narrative" to "individual narrative", and from "perfect narrative" to "authentic narrative", so that the concept of sustainable development can truly enter the public's heart.

References

- [1] Grob, K., & Lee, V. S. (2025, June 5). It's time to update how your company talks about sustainability. *Harvard Business Review*. <https://hbr.org/2025/06/its-time-to-update-how-your-company-talks-about-sustainability>
- [2] Li, J., & Xu, S. (2022). The impact of corporate pseudo-social responsibility behaviors on consumers' moral anger and boycott intention. *Management Review*, 34(8), 184–194.

- [3] Yang, G., Liu, S., & Pan, Y. (2026). Research on corporate ESG "greenwashing" behaviors: Manifestations, behavioral motivations and governance mechanisms. *Foreign Economics & Management*, 48(4), 3–22.
- [4] Kühn, R., & De Villiers, C. (2021). Digital sustainability communication: Website disclosure versus stakeholder dialogue. *Corporate Communications: An International Journal*, 26(3), 489–506.
- [5] Miao, M., & Shang, Y. (2025). Exploration on the governance path of corporate "greenwashing" from the perspective of collaborative audit. *Friends of Accounting*, (S2), 57–61.
- [6] Li, Y., Zhuang, M., Guo, D., & Zhang, S. (2025). Symbolic or substantive: Corporate ESG action strategies under legitimacy pressure. *Nankai Business Review*. Advance online publication. <https://link.cnki.net/urlid/12.1288.f.20251230.1805.004>
- [7] Wei, Y., & Gao, J. (2026). Research on the influence of executive incentives on corporate ESG "greenwashing" behaviors. *Science of Science and Management of S.&T.*, 47(1), 153–167.
- [8] Shu, Y., & Xu, G. (2025). A review of corporate green silence behaviors: Motivations, consequences and governance. *Friends of Accounting*, (24), 108–115.
- [9] Zhou, W., Xue, H., & Sun, F. (2020). Corporate social responsibility communication in China: Reality and challenges. *China Development*, 20(5), 11–16.
- [10] Yue, G. (2023). Reform and integration of corporate ESG communication on social media platforms. *Youth Journalist*, (20), 78–80.
- [11] Chen, W., & Shi, C. (2023). The influence of brand values and empathy on brand loyalty. *East China Economic Management*, 37(4), 120–128.
- [12] Chen, L., & Hu, X. (2022). Corporate social responsibility, online emotional communication and brand value: A case study based on Hongxing Erke. *Journal of Commercial Economics*, (3), 94–96.
- [13] Zhang, L. (2026). Research on brand narrative strategy and consumer empathy based on emotional economy. *International Brand Observer*, (8), 56–58.
- [14] Li, Q., & Jiang, T. (2023). Can top management team internationalization inhibit corporate "greenwashing" behaviors?—Also on the influence of trust culture. *Journal of China University of Geosciences (Social Sciences Edition)*, 23(4), 37–55.
- [15] Qiu, T. (2024). The regulatory logic and improvement path of unfair competition for ESG information disclosure "greenwashing". *Gansu Finance*, (7), 36–42.