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Leveraging Sustainability Communication for Crisis Resilience and Leadership Transformation in Emerging Markets

Rafiat A Gawat¹, Kayode Abe²

^{1& 2}Rome Business School

Abstract

This study investigates how sustainability communication drives crisis resilience and leadership transformation in emerging markets. The quantitative data were analyzed using regression to analyze the relationships among the variables. The regression results reveal that sustainability communication showed a significant positive influence on crisis resilience highlighting its role in translating into effective crisis response and adaptive leadership capacity. Additionally, sustainability communication significantly impacted both Crisis Resilience and Leadership Transformation thereby underscoring the synergistic relationship between leadership evolution, resilience building and long-term organizational stability. The result also showed that sustainability communication variables in the study collectively explained 54.2% of the variance in crisis resilience and 51.6% in leadership transformation. The study provides valuable insights for leaders and policymakers in emerging markets seeking to build crisis ready and sustainability driven organizations.

Keywords: Sustainability communication, crisis resilience, leadership transformation, organizational sustainability, emerging markets.

1. Background of the Study

Sustainability communication (SC) plays a crucial role in deepening understanding and fostering engagement in corporate sustainable development. According to Kumpu (2022), SC is a process that promotes mutual understanding centered on sustainability by integrating the relationship between humans and the environment into public discourse. This approach aims to raise awareness about environmental challenges while reinforcing shared social values. Although the concept draws from diverse disciplines such as psychology, sociology, media studies, communication, and systems theory, its theoretical development has been hindered by a lack of definitional clarity, resulting in conceptual ambiguity (Golob et al., 2023). This lack of precision has constrained theoretical coherence and highlighted the importance of developing more refined conceptual frameworks for sustainability communication research.

Existing literature has tended to prioritize environmental dimensions of SC, often focusing on areas such as green advertising and one-directional communication strategies (Borges et al., 2023). While this emphasis is valuable, it also reveals a gap in addressing the broader social and economic aspects of sustainability. Furthermore, Voci et al. (2024), observe a growing inclination toward applied and practice based communication approaches in empirical research but while in practical terms it may limit a deeper exploration of the systemic and theoretical foundations necessary for a more holistic understanding of sustainability communication.

Although distinct in focus, Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR) communication is closely related to sustainability communication and has been extensively explored in previous literature. Major research streams in CSR communication distinguished between two primary perspectives which are the *strategic* approach that examines the underlying strategies guiding CSR communication and the operative approach which focuses on the practical methods companies use to convey CSR messages. Expanding on this a wide range of perspectives can be identified spanning from public relations, marketing and organizational communication and emphasized key

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themes such as disclosure, accountability and the influence of CSR communication on corporate reputation and stakeholder engagement.

More recently, Zainuldin et al (2022), employed a bibliometric method and reaffirmed the fragmented yet interdisciplinary nature of the CSR communication field. They identified two dominant frameworks shaping its evolution: the business case and the reporting frame. The business case framework focuses on the tangible and intangible benefits of corporate investments in CSR communication, aligning with a strategic management perspective. In contrast, the reporting frame, rooted in accounting and accountability theories, conceptualizes CSR communication as a disclosure mechanism for non-financial information, aimed at increasing transparency and trust.

Organizations in emerging markets are increasingly recognizing the importance of sustainability communication not merely as a reporting exercise but as a strategic capability that underpins both resilience and leadership transformation (Ibn-Mohammed et al., 2024). As disruptions such as pandemics, climate shocks and economic instability become more frequent than the ability of firms to communicate their sustainability efforts effectively has emerged as a key pillar of organizational preparedness and crisis response (Gigliotti et al., 2025). Sustainability communication is not optional as it now serves a dual purpose such as building stakeholder trust in stable times and acting as a stabilizing signal during crises.

A strong foundation in sustainability communication helps organizations articulate their purpose and values thereby creating coherence between internal practices and external messaging. In emerging markets where institutional infrastructures may be weaker and crises happens more frequent makes firms that embed communication around sustainability are better positioned to maintain stakeholder confidence and adapt to shocks (Xiao et al., 2025). For example, purpose-driven companies in these contexts do more than comply with environmental or social standards; they use their sustainability agenda to lead transformational change and reinforce their leadership credibility. Ghosh et al (2025), further highlights that leaders who integrate resilience, agility and sustainability into their communication frameworks create competitive advantages during times of change.

In this regard, sustainability communication contributes to both crisis resilience and leadership transformation. Resilient organizations are those with the capacity to anticipate, respond to, and learn from disruptions and have capabilities that are shaped significantly by how leadership frames and communicates during uncertainty (Sreeja et al., 2024). At the same time, leadership transformation occurs when leaders shift from managing risk in a reactive mode to guiding sustainable, purpose-driven strategies aligned with their stakeholders' expectations (Ibn-Mohammed et al., 2024). In emerging markets, this dual shift is particularly urgent given the convergence of regulatory deficiency, stakeholder demands and heightened operational risk environments.

Despite the critical importance of this nexus, literature on how sustainability communication specifically functions as a tool for crisis resilience and leadership transformation remains limited, especially within emerging markets. Many studies have addressed sustainability disclosures (Eng et al 202., Wahyuningrum et al 2023., Liu et al 2023., Grishunin et al 2022) or crisis communication (Babatunde 2022., Kuipers et al 2023., Kwok et al 2022., Nuortimo et al 2024) in isolation but few have looked at the interactive dynamics of communication, resilience and leadership in contexts marked by resource constraints and complex stakeholder networks. This gap is especially acute in emerging market firms, where sustainability communication may serve as one of the few mechanisms for signaling legitimacy and embedding transformative leadership.

Therefore, this study examines how sustainability communication can be leveraged by organizations in emerging markets to enhance crisis resilience and facilitate leadership transformation. Specifically, it explores the communicative practices that enable firms to build stakeholder trust, prepare for disruption and evolve leadership frameworks toward sustainable value creation. By doing so, the research contributes to the understanding of how emerging market organizations can not only survive crises but use sustainability communication to enter a new leadership paradigm.

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2. Literature Review

Braga et al (2024), investigated the foundational concepts and evolving research streams of sustainability communication (SC) within the marketing discipline through a comprehensive review of existing literature. Their study draws on a dataset of 103 peer-reviewed articles published in top-tier marketing journals. Using co-citation analysis and qualitative thematic exploration, it maps the intellectual structure and key thematic areas shaping the current SC discourse. Findings reveal that sustainability communication in marketing is grounded in institutional theory, stakeholder theory, corporate social responsibility (CSR) communication, green advertising, ethical consumerism, and social marketing for sustainable consumption. Moreover, four dominant themes emerge in contemporary research which are sustainability reporting, sustainability advertising, consumer responses, and the promotion of pro-sustainable behaviors. The study clarifies the conceptual foundations and scope of SC in marketing by synthesizing prior studies and identifying unexplored areas. It provides a valuable roadmap for future research, enabling scholars to understand the evolution of SC and to identify promising directions for further inquiry.

Golob et al (2023), performed an overview of both the historical evolution and the current state of sustainability communication (SC) by examining the significance and influence of conceptual and empirical contributions while offering insights into the future direction of SC research. Employing a meta-narrative systematic literature review approach, the study analyzes the concepts, theoretical frameworks, and empirical methodologies used across 116 scholarly articles in the field. It highlights key dimensions of SC, such as sustainability and green advertising, sustainability reporting, and greenwashing. The findings indicate that the literature is predominantly environmentally oriented with applied communication approaches being the most common.

Mizrak (2024) asserted that crisis management and risk mitigation are essential pillars of organizational resilience and success in today's volatile and unpredictable business environment. They further stated that the ability to effectively manage crises and address strategic risks determines an organization's capacity to endure disruptions, safeguard its reputation, and sustain stakeholder confidence. This study adopts a mixed-method research design integrating expert interviews with an extensive literature review to provide an in-depth exploration of these critical areas. Through the identification of key themes and recurring patterns, the research seeks to formulate evidence-based strategies that enable leaders to proactively respond to crises and manage risks with foresight and precision. Ultimately, the findings aim to enhance organizational stability and long-term sustainability while contributing valuable insights to the broader fields of crisis management and risk mitigation.

Lee et al (2022), introduced a responsible AI roadmap integrated within the crisis information management cycle. Their roadmap outlines six key propositions designed to address critical challenges and considerations associated with the ethical and responsible use of AI in crisis resilience management. It encompasses a broad range of interconnected issues, including fairness, bias mitigation, transparency, explainability, accountability, privacy, security, equity, inter-organizational collaboration, and public engagement. By examining the complexities of AI-driven information management and decision-making during crises, the paper underscores the urgent need for responsible AI frameworks and practices. The proposed roadmap serves as a foundational guide for researchers, practitioners, developers, emergency managers, humanitarian agencies, and policymakers to navigate the ethical dimensions of AI and foster responsible innovation in crisis resilience management.

Minniti et al (2025), took from dataset of high frequency COVID-19 statistics across U.S examined the link between healthcare decision making autonomy and pandemic outcomes based on the specific number of COVID-19 cases and deaths per county. The findings demonstrate that greater decision-making autonomy is significantly associated with lower infection and mortality rates, suggesting that autonomy enhances resilience capacity. Furthermore, this relationship is amplified with a diverse mix of healthcare organizations and in contexts where continuous response adaptation is necessary due to the evolving nature of crises. Overall, the results highlight the importance of a systems-oriented approach to resilience and suggest that empowering localized decision making fosters more adaptive, context-specific and sustainable crisis responses.

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Borges et al (2023), opined that sustainability has become an increasingly prominent topic in both societal and organizational discussions, prompting many companies to implement communication strategies centered on this theme. The purpose of this article is to identify, through a systematic review of the literature, the various approaches, tools and channels companies employ to communicate sustainability. Their review yielded a final sample of 18 articles published across 14 academic journals. From the analysis, seven key themes emerged: (i) communication strategies, (ii) the relationship between communication and consumer behavior, (iii) communication and health benefits, (iv) sustainability and corporate social responsibility (CSR), (v) sustainable business models, (vi) sustainability and process optimization, and (vii) sustainability and environmental impact. Their findings indicated that effective sustainability communication strategies include leveraging new technologies such as the internet, social media, and corporate websites; crafting value propositions aligned with consumer behavior; disseminating transparent and consistent information; and involving multidisciplinary teams in communication efforts. These insights contribute to the advancement of academic literature and provide a foundation for developing more efficient and effective public policies that enhance communication between companies and consumers. Furthermore, the study offers practical recommendations to support organizations in designing and implementing robust sustainability communication strategies.

Recent scholars have begun to explore how individuals, organizations, and communities collaborate to develop collective resilience capacities. However, limited attention has been given to how institutional environments shape local crisis responses. This gap is critical, as crises unfold within complex systems where decisions made at one level can either hinder or strengthen the resilience efforts of other actors within communities. Moreover, much of the existing resilience research assumes crises to be static, overlooking the dynamic need to adapt and revise responses over time. This focus on applied tools complements the theoretical foundations explored by Golob et al. (2023), yet it also reveals a gap: a comprehensive framework linking these practical tools to resilience outcomes is still missing.

This gap is critical in emerging markets, where, as Mizrak (2024) asserted, crisis management and risk mitigation are essential pillars of organizational resilience and success in today's volatile and unpredictable business environment. The ability to effectively manage crises and address strategic risks determines an organization's capacity to endure disruptions, safeguard its reputation, and sustain stakeholder confidence.

However, most of the existing research tends to focus on communication outputs rather than communication impact. What remains underexplored is how sustainability communication attributes interact to shape organizational resilience and leadership change particularly under the constraints of emerging economies. This limitation defines the conceptual gap that the present study seeks to address.

The nexus of communication, resilience, and leadership remains underexplored, especially within emerging market firms. Many studies have addressed sustainability disclosures (Eng et al., 2022; Wahyuningrum et al., 2023; Liu et al., 2023; Grishunin et al., 2022) or crisis communication (Babatunde, 2022; Kuipers et al., 2023; Kwok et al., 2022; Nuortimo et al., 2024) in isolation, but few have looked at the interactive dynamics of communication, resilience, and leadership in contexts marked by resource constraints and complex stakeholder networks. This study addresses this gap by providing an integrated framework.

Theoretical Framework and Methodology

Integrated Conceptual Model

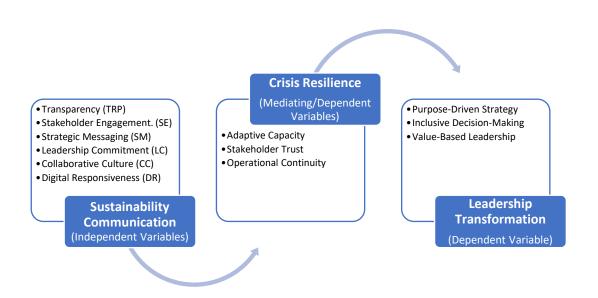
This study examines the hypothesized direct effects of six dimensions of Sustainability Communication (SC) on Crisis Resilience (CR) and Leadership Transformation (LT). The model posits that specific communicative practices (independent variables) directly contribute to an organization's adaptive capacity (mediating variable) and the evolution of its leadership ethos (dependent variable).

Figure 1:

Conceptual framework linking sustainability communication to crisis resilience and leadership transformation.

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This study hypothesizes that Leadership Commitment (LC) directly influences Crisis Resilience (CR) because committed leaders can rapidly mobilize resources and provide a credible, stabilizing voice during disruption.

3. Methodology

Research Design

This study adopted a quantitative research design to examine the relationship between sustainability communication, crisis resilience and leadership transformation within emerging market contexts. The design was chosen because it allows for statistical testing of hypotheses and provides insights into how communication dimensions influence organizational resilience and leadership behavior. A cross-sectional survey approach was employed to collect data from managers and communication professionals across multiple industries in emerging markets. This design ensured the capture of diverse organizational perspectives on sustainability practices and crisis response mechanisms.

Sampling Technique

Purposive sampling technique was used to select respondents with direct involvement in sustainability communication, leadership functions and crisis management. The study targeted 250 respondents out of which 210 valid responses were received and analyzed which represent an effective response rate of 84%. This approach ensured that only informed participants with relevant experience contributed to the findings, enhancing the reliability and validity of the results.

Validity and Reliability of the Instrument

The instrument was reviewed by academic experts to ensure content validity. A pilot test involving 20 respondents was conducted to confirm clarity and relevance of the items. Construct reliability was assessed using Cronbach's Alpha coefficients with all variables exceeding the acceptable threshold of 0.70 indicating satisfactory internal consistency.

4. Results

4.1. Descriptive statistics

The descriptive results provide an overview of the demographic characteristics of the 210 participants who responded to the survey on sustainability communication, crisis resilience, and leadership transformation in emerging markets.

The analysis revealed that 58.57% of respondents were male, while 41.43% were female, indicating a relatively balanced gender representation among organizational professionals. In terms of age distribution, the majority (79.05%) of respondents were between 26 and 45 years, reflecting a mature workforce actively engaged in sustainability and leadership practices.

Regarding educational attainment, 84.29% of respondents possessed at least a tertiary education (undergraduate, graduate, or postgraduate qualification), suggesting a well-informed and literate sample capable of engaging meaningfully with issues of leadership and organizational communication.

Occupationally, 42.86% were employed in the private sector, 30.00% in public service, 14.29% were entrepreneurs or business owners, and 12.85% worked in non-governmental or development organizations. This reflects a balanced distribution of participants from diverse organizational settings across emerging market economies.

With respect to professional experience, 55.24% of respondents had more than five years of work experience, while 44.76% had less than five years. This distribution suggests that most participants had adequate exposure to organizational systems, leadership dynamics, and sustainability practices.

Concerning engagement with sustainability communication, 63.81% of respondents indicated that their organizations regularly communicate sustainability initiatives and performance updates, while 36.19% stated that such communication occurs infrequently or not at all. Furthermore, 59.05% of respondents reported being personally involved in sustainability-related projects or programs within their organizations, highlighting the growing relevance of sustainability communication in shaping leadership and crisis management strategies.

Table 1. Demographic Characteristics of Respondents (N = 210)

Variable	Category	Frequency (n)	Percentage (%)
Gender	Male	123	58.57
	Female	87	41.43
	Total	210	100.00
Age	Below 25	18	8.57
	26–35	91	43.33
	36–45	75	35.72
	Above 45	26	12.38
	Total	210	100.00
Educational Level	Secondary	12	5.71

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Variable	Category	Frequency (n)	Percentage (%)
	Undergraduate	88	41.90
	Graduate	73	34.76
	Postgraduate	37	17.62
	Total	210	100.00
Occupation	Public Sector Employee	63	30.00
	Private Sector Employee	90	42.86
	Entrepreneur/Self- employed	30	14.29
	NGO/Development Worker	27	12.85
	Total	210	100.00
Years of Experience	Less than 5 years	94	44.76
	5–10 years	78	37.14
	Above 10 years	38	18.10
	Total	210	100.00
Involvement in Sustainability Projects	Actively Involved	124	59.05
	Not Actively Involved	86	40.95
	Total	210	100.00
Sustainability Communication Practic in Organization	e Regular Communication	134	63.81
	Occasional/No Communication	76	36.19
	Total	210	100.00

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4.2 Inferential Statistics

The structural model showed an acceptable fit. The analysis revealed that SC dimensions collectively explained 54.2% of the variance in Crisis Resilience (CR) and 51.6% of the variance in Leadership Transformation (LT).

Regression Results

Table 2. Hypothesis Testing Results

Hypothesis	T Statistics	P Values	Decision
H1a: TRP → CR	0.728	0.467	Not Supported
H1b: SE \rightarrow CR	0.892	0.318	Not Supported
H1c: SM → CR	0.661	0.525	Not Supported
H1d: LC → CR	2.583	0.009	Supported
H1e: CC → CR	3.041	0.002	Supported
H1f: DR \rightarrow CR	2.764	0.005	Supported
H2a: TRP → LT	3.402	0.001	Supported
H2b: LC → LT	4.987	0.000	Supported
H2c: CC → LT	3.578	0.002	Supported
H2d: SE \rightarrow LT	2.943	0.004	Supported
H2e: SM → LT	0.811	0.369	Not Supported
H2f: DR → LT	1.064	0.289	Not Supported

The results presented in Table 5 show the outcomes of the hypothesized relationships between sustainability communication dimensions and organizational outcomes. The findings reveal that certain sustainability communication factors such as Transparency (TRP), Stakeholder Engagement (SE), and Strategic Messaging (SM) did not have a statistically significant influence on Crisis Resilience (CR) (p > 0.05).

The insignificance of TRP suggests that transparency alone may not be sufficient to enhance resilience unless it is accompanied by actionable strategies and consistent follow-up communication. Similarly, SE and SM not showing significant effects indicate that mere interaction or message design without deep emotional connection, credibility, or internal alignment may not independently strengthen the organization's ability to withstand crisis pressures.

However, Leadership Commitment (LC), Collaborative Culture (CC), and Digital Responsiveness (DR) exhibited significant positive effects on Crisis Resilience (CR) (p < 0.05), confirming Hypotheses H1d, H1e, and H1f. This implies that an engaged leadership team, a supportive collaborative environment, and rapid digital response mechanisms collectively enhance the firm's adaptive capability during crises.

Moreover, TRP, LC, CC, and SE demonstrated significant positive effects on Leadership Transformation (LT) (p < 0.05), supporting Hypotheses H2a, H2b, H2c, and H2d. These results indicate that transparent communication, visionary leadership, and stakeholder inclusivity foster transformational shifts in leadership behavior and organizational decision-making. In contrast, SM and DR had no significant influence on LT (p > 0.05), suggesting that message strategy and technological response, while useful, require complementary leadership alignment to yield transformational outcomes.

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These outcomes emphasize that sustainability communication alone is not sufficient for resilience and it must be anchored in leadership commitment, cultural collaboration, and digital agility. The results further demonstrate that leadership transformation plays a pivotal mediating role between communication strategies and sustainable performance outcomes, validating strategic focus on embedding sustainability narratives within its leadership and crisis management structures.

5. Conclusion

This study underscores the strategic importance of transparent, value-driven, and adaptive communication in fostering organizational resilience and leadership evolution amid uncertainty. The findings reveal that SC, when integrated as a core organizational practice, serves as both a stabilizing and transformative force by enabling firms to maintain stakeholder trust, safeguard reputation, and mobilize collective action during crises.

In emerging markets, where volatility and institutional weaknesses often amplify business risks, effective SC helps bridge the gap between corporate intent and social expectation. Ultimately, this research affirms that crisis resilience and leadership transformation are not merely functions of strategic agility but of communicative integrity anchored in authenticity, accountability, and long-term value creation.

In essence, sustainability communication becomes the bridge between reactive survival and proactive leadership transformation, turning moments of crisis into opportunities for renewal and purpose-led evolution.

6. Recommendations

Leadership Playbook for Transformative Sustainability Communication

To operationalize the study's findings, leaders in emerging markets should implement a three-point playbook focused on internal alignment, culture, and technological agility.

• Lead from the Front, Not the Manual

Action: Leaders must personally champion sustainability narratives in both internal and external communication. Evidence from Study: Leadership Commitment (LC) was the dominant and highly significant driver of both Crisis Resilience (CR) and Leadership Transformation (LT). Example: The CEO should host quarterly sustainability town halls or internal dialogues, rather than delegating sustainability communication entirely to the PR team.

• Engineer a Culture of Collaboration, Not Silos

Action: Create cross-functional "sustainability pods" that bring together representatives from operations, HR, finance, and communications to embed sustainability communication (SC) into everyday decision-making.

Evidence from Study: Collaborative Culture (CC) was a key factor for both resilience (CR) and transformation (LT).

Example: Use digital collaboration platforms to run crisis-simulation exercises that build collective response capacity and reinforce a culture of shared accountability.

• Embed Digital Responsiveness, Don't Just Adopt It

Action: Move beyond using digital tools merely for information broadcasting. Use social listening and data analytics to conduct real-time "stakeholder sentiment pulses" that guide communication strategy.

Evidence from Study: Digital Responsiveness (DR) was critical for building Crisis Resilience (CR). **Example:** During a supply-chain disruption, deploy targeted social-media updates and a dedicated web portal for suppliers to demonstrate proactive management and transparency in action.

7. Future Research

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Future studies should extend the current model by incorporating moderating variables such as organizational culture, governance quality, or national policy frameworks that may influence the strength of these relationships. Comparative analyses across different emerging economies and industry sectors would deepen understanding of how sustainability communication affects crisis management and leadership evolution across diverse contexts.

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