

# **Integrated communication strategies for palm oil advocacy against negative campaigns: A review on unified narrative and all stakeholders coopetition**

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## **ABSTRACT**

The global palm oil industry continues to face intense scrutiny and negative campaigns related to environmental degradation, deforestation, and social injustice. These narratives, often amplified by international media and advocacy groups, have significantly influenced public perception and policy discourse, particularly in key import markets. In response, stakeholders from producing countries have increasingly recognized the urgency of adopting integrated communication strategies to defend the industry's legitimacy. This review explores the strategic potential of a unified narrative and stakeholder coopetition—an approach that blends collaboration and competition—to strengthen palm oil advocacy. Drawing on diverse literature across communication, environmental policy, and agribusiness, the study identifies critical gaps in narrative consistency, misalignment of stakeholder messaging, and the fragmented nature of advocacy efforts. The findings highlight the importance of narrative framing, multi-platform messaging, and the active involvement of government, private sector, academia, and civil society in coordinated advocacy. By consolidating voices and building shared values, the palm oil sector can reposition itself within global sustainability dialogues. This paper contributes a conceptual framework for understanding how stakeholder coopetition and integrated communication can reshape advocacy strategies amid growing environmental pressures.

**Keywords:** Palm Oil Advocacy. Integrated Communication. Unified Narrative. Stakeholder Coopetition. Negative Campaigns. Sustainability Communication.

## **1 INTRODUCTION**

Palm oil is a globally traded commodity with significant economic contributions to producing countries, especially Indonesia and Malaysia. It supports the livelihoods of millions of smallholder farmers, generates export revenue, and supplies essential raw materials for food, energy, and cosmetic industries (Basiron, 2007; Zen et al., 2005). Despite its economic relevance, the palm oil sector has been persistently challenged by intense negative campaigns portraying it as a major driver of environmental degradation, deforestation, biodiversity loss, and social conflict (Dauvergne, 2018; Ngan et al., 2022; Pye, 2010). These campaigns, often led by international NGOs and amplified by global media, have shaped public perceptions, influenced consumer behavior, and led to regulatory constraints in key markets (Bartley, 2018; Purnomo et al., 2023; Schouten & Glasbergen, 2011).

In response, palm oil-producing countries have undertaken sustainability initiatives such as

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the Roundtable on Sustainable Palm Oil (RSPO), Indonesian Sustainable Palm Oil (ISPO), and Malaysian Sustainable Palm Oil (MSPO) certifications (Abdul Majid et al., 2021; Hidayat et al., 2015; Jamaluddin et al., 2023; Zachlod et al., 2025). However, these measures often fall short of changing global narratives due to fragmented communication efforts and a lack of coordination among stakeholders (Silva-Castañeda, 2012). Instead of forming a unified and consistent message, the sector's responses tend to be reactive, defensive, and inconsistent across actors such as governments, industry players, and local communities (Hospes, 2014; Ruyschaert, Denis; Salles, 2014).

The heart of the problem lies in the absence of an integrated communication strategy that consolidates efforts across stakeholders into a cohesive advocacy framework (Adisetiawan & Nurhajati, 2023). Current communication approaches remain largely disconnected, leading to inefficiencies in message delivery and missed opportunities in influencing global opinion (Hornik, Robert and Yanovitzky, 2003; Khatun et al., 2017). Moreover, anti-palm oil narratives often employ emotional appeals, powerful imagery, and simplified messages, which are more compelling to the global public than technical sustainability reports or defensive rebuttals (Risbourg, 2017; Teng et al., 2020). To compete effectively in this information landscape, palm oil advocacy must evolve beyond technical compliance toward strategic narrative-building and audience engagement.

One promising framework to overcome this communication gap is the integration of a unified narrative—a strategic communication model where all stakeholders align under a core message that reflects shared values, transparency, and long-term commitment to sustainability (Mebratu, 1998; Schoeneborn et al., 2020; Sulemana et al., 2025). A unified narrative does not ignore the complexity of palm oil but presents it in a way that is authentic, emotionally resonant, and globally relevant (Rust et al., 2021).

Complementing this, the concept of stakeholder coopetition offers a novel approach to overcome institutional fragmentation. Traditionally rooted in business strategy, coopetition refers to collaboration among competitors to achieve mutual benefits (Astari et al., 2025; Bouncken et al., 2015; Nugroho & Nasution, 2024). In the palm oil context, coopetition can be expanded to include government agencies, companies, smallholders, NGOs, scientists, and media actors who may hold different interests but share a common goal: to protect the legitimacy and sustainability of palm oil in global markets (Kalogiannidis et al., 2025; Nesadurai, 2017; Radyi et al., 2024; Valentinov et al., 2025).

By enabling collaborative advocacy, coopetition fosters resource sharing, synchronized messaging, and collective problem-solving without diluting each stakeholder's autonomy (Gnyawali & Charleton, 2018). This model supports long-term trust-building and shared

accountability while addressing power asymmetries in global debates (Bostrom & Hallstrom, 2010). Yet, research on the practical application of coopetition in environmental communication remains limited, especially in high-stakes commodities like palm oil (Christiawan & Limaho, 2020).

This paper employs a qualitative literature review to examine how integrated communication strategies—anchored in unified narrative construction and stakeholder coopetition—can counter negative campaigns and reposition palm oil in the global sustainability discourse (Valentinov et al., 2025; Wardhani & Rahadian, 2021; Yacob, 2019). By synthesizing interdisciplinary perspectives from communication science, policy studies, agribusiness, and international relations, this study identifies best practices, challenges, and potential frameworks to support coordinated and credible advocacy (Ardian et al., 2018; Brandi, 2021). The paper also explores the role of digital media, participatory storytelling, and transnational alliances in shaping public opinion and policy outcomes related to palm oil (Adelle et al., 2022; Delabre & Okereke, 2020; Zainuddin et al., 2024).

## **2 LITERATURE REVIEW**

### **2.1 THEORETICAL FOUNDATIONS AND FRAMEWORKS**

The theoretical underpinnings of integrated communication strategies for palm oil advocacy rest primarily on stakeholder theory and environmental communication frameworks. Stakeholder theory, as conceptualized in recent literature, emphasizes that organizations must acknowledge and consider both internal and external stakeholders who can influence or are influenced by organizational activities. In the context of palm oil advocacy, this theory provides a crucial foundation for understanding how diverse actors—including governments, industry players, civil society organizations, and communities—interact within complex governance structures (Mahajan et al., 2023; Newig et al., 2023; Olukorede, 2025).

Environmental communication theory has evolved significantly since 2015, with researchers emphasizing the importance of strategic narrative construction and audience engagement beyond technical compliance measures (Saka-Helmhout et al., 2024; Trammell et al., 2025). The concept of transmedia edutainment (TE-E) has emerged as a particularly relevant framework, demonstrating how multiple narrative platforms can effectively minimize counterarguing compared to traditional single-medium approaches. This framework aligns closely with the unified narrative approach advocated in palm oil communication strategies, where consistent messaging across multiple platforms and stakeholders becomes essential for effective advocacy (Dewi et al., 2024; Shata et al., 2025).

## 2.2 INTEGRATED COMMUNICATION STRATEGIES IN ENVIRONMENTAL ADVOCACY

Recent scholarship has emphasized the critical importance of integrated communication strategies in environmental advocacy, particularly in contested sectors like palm oil production. The ASEAN Communication Master Plan 2018-2025 provides a comprehensive framework that demonstrates how regional bodies can coordinate messaging across multiple stakeholders while maintaining flexibility for local adaptation. This model emphasises the importance of "A Community of Opportunities for All" as an overarching message that resonates across different stakeholder groups while allowing for customised sub-messaging(ASEAN Secretariat, 2019).

Studies on environmental communication effectiveness reveal that negative frames emphasizing climate crises and disasters are more prevalent than solution-oriented narratives, yet positive frames focusing on solutions and individual actions enhance public engagement and optimism(Trammell et al., 2025). This finding is particularly relevant for palm oil advocacy, where the industry has often adopted defensive communication strategies rather than proactive, solution-oriented narratives. Research demonstrates that participatory communication and digital strategies significantly enhance emotional engagement, message clarity, and behavioural response in environmental advocacy contexts(Lubis et al., 2024; Trammell et al., 2025; Zainuddin et al., 2024; Zhuang, 2024).

The challenge of fragmented communication efforts in environmental advocacy has been well-documented in recent literature(Bukenya T., 2025). Effective communication requires what researchers term "strategic narrative-building", which goes beyond technical compliance toward authentic audience engagement(Saka-Helmhout et al., 2024; Trammell et al., 2025). Organisations like Oxygen Conservation have demonstrated the effectiveness of transparency-based communication strategies that combine storytelling with evidence-based arguments to influence environmental policies(Stockdale, 2024; Sulemana et al., 2025).

## 2.3 STAKEHOLDER COOPETITION IN ENVIRONMENTAL GOVERNANCE

The concept of coopetition—collaboration among competitors to achieve mutual benefits—has gained significant attention in environmental governance literature since 2015. In the palm oil sector specifically, research has demonstrated how coopetition can lead to norm emergence in contentious governance arenas, particularly in the adoption of zero-deforestation criteria by the Roundtable on Sustainable Palm Oil (RSPO)(Christiawan & Limaho, 2021; Newig et al., 2023).

Studies on sustainability strategies and stakeholder influence in the Indonesian palm oil industry have identified key stakeholders, including shareholders, NGOs, government agencies, buyers, and RSPO board members, each influencing different aspects of sustainability

practices (Valentinov et al., 2025). The research reveals that stakeholder relationships significantly influence sustainability strategy implementation, though outcomes vary based on the specific nature of these relationships. This finding supports the coopetition framework's emphasis on collaborative resource sharing and synchronised messaging while maintaining stakeholder autonomy (Mahajan et al., 2023; Soleha, 2022).

Multi-stakeholder collaboration has been identified as a critical pathway for sustainable palm oil trade and addressing global green trade initiatives. The Indonesian experience demonstrates how stakeholder consultation processes can lead to common visions and action tracks, with emphasis on smallholders, trade, production, fair systems, market access, communication, and multi-sector responsibility. These findings align with coopetition theory's prediction that collaborative approaches can address power asymmetries in global debates while maintaining individual stakeholder interests (Mahajan et al., 2023; Purnomo et al., 2024).

## 2.4 COMMUNICATION CHALLENGES AND NEGATIVE CAMPAIGN RESPONSES

The palm oil industry faces unique communication challenges stemming from what researchers term "insidious misinformation" that is often subjective rather than evidence-based. Studies reveal that misinformation about palm oil stems from incomplete research and the widespread dissemination of findings that lack solid theoretical or clinical support. The Malaysian Palm Oil Council's response strategy emphasises the importance of evidence-based arguments and comprehensive education to counter misinformation campaigns (MPOC, 2023).

Research on climate misinformation and disinformation provides valuable insights for palm oil advocacy strategies (Bukenya T., 2025). Climate misinformation refers to false or inaccurate information spread without malicious intent, while disinformation is deliberately fabricated to deceive for political, financial, or ideological reasons. Both forms undermine public trust in scientific evidence and delay policy responses, creating polarized public discourse (Papilo et al., 2022). This framework helps explain why palm oil advocacy efforts have struggled against coordinated negative campaigns that employ emotional appeals and simplified messaging (UNDP, 2025; Zhuang, 2024).

The effectiveness of counterstrategy approaches has been demonstrated in various environmental communication contexts. Studies show that repeated narrative exposure and reinforcement across platforms not only enhance message reinforcement but also intensify audience experience with content, making audiences more receptive to messages rather than resistant (Bevan et al., 2020; Nugroho & Nasution, 2024). This finding supports the integrated communication approach that emphasises consistent messaging across multiple platforms and

stakeholder groups(Mahajan et al., 2023; Shata et al., 2025).

## 2.5 CERTIFICATION SYSTEMS AND COMMUNICATION EFFECTIVENESS

Recent research on sustainability certification systems reveals complex relationships between certification processes and communication effectiveness. A 2025 study using satellite data and economic analysis found that RSPO certification inadvertently affects plantation efficiency, with decreases observed both before and following certification obtainment(Zachlod et al., 2025). This finding highlights the importance of considering unintended consequences of sustainability certifications beyond their immediate goals, suggesting that communication strategies must address not only positive outcomes but also acknowledge and explain complex trade-offs(Zachlod et al., 2025).

The collaboration between Indonesian Sustainable Palm Oil (ISPO) and RSPO certification systems demonstrates the potential for integrated approaches to sustainability governance(Jamaluddin et al., 2023; Wulandari & Nasution, 2021). Joint studies comparing these systems have identified opportunities for combined compliance audits, more efficient field audit processes, and recommendations for future cooperation. This collaborative approach aligns with coopetition principles by enabling resource sharing and synchronised messaging while maintaining system autonomy(Newig et al., 2023; RSPO, 2013).

Research on certification effectiveness reveals that government-led multi-stakeholder collaboration can be particularly effective when it incorporates participatory approaches and community engagement(Civera et al., 2025; Orazi et al., 2017; Zachlod et al., 2025; Zainuddin et al., 2024). Examples from Thailand, Nigeria, and Indonesia demonstrate how jurisdictional approaches that bring together government bodies, private sector actors, and civil society organisations can achieve common sustainability goals through coordinated communication and implementation strategies(RSPO, 2024; Satriawisti & Parung, 2024; Valentinov et al., 2025).

## 2.6 DIGITAL COMMUNICATION AND STAKEHOLDER ENGAGEMENT

The digital transformation of environmental communication has created new opportunities and challenges for palm oil advocacy. Research on social media's role in environmental communication reveals that platforms can be effective in reaching diverse audiences and fostering global dialogue, as demonstrated by movements like Fridays for Future(Briandana & Mohamad Saleh, 2022; Confetto et al., 2023). However, studies also highlight the challenge of algorithmic bias that tends to favour sensational anti-palm oil content over nuanced, fact-based explanations(The Eco Well, 2025; Trammell et al., 2025).

Stakeholder engagement measurement has evolved significantly, with organizations now employing sophisticated KPI-based frameworks to track media reach, sentiment analysis, and audience engagement metrics across channels (Ardian et al., 2018; Saka-Helmhout et al., 2024). These measurement approaches allow for real-time adaptation of campaign strategies, ensuring relevance and responsiveness to changing stakeholder concerns. Research indicates that organisations actively measuring stakeholder engagement see up to 20% improvement in alignment and productivity (Ardian et al., 2018; Mahajan et al., 2023; Sustainability Directory, 2025).

The importance of participatory communication approaches in digital environments has been well-documented. Studies show that community-based participatory approaches are often more successful in raising awareness and changing behaviour because they involve communities directly in planning and implementation processes (Zainuddin et al., 2024). This finding supports the integrated communication framework's emphasis on stakeholder involvement in message development and dissemination (D'Orazio, 2022; Mahajan et al., 2023; Shahreza et al., 2025).

## 2.7 GAPS AND FUTURE DIRECTIONS

Despite significant advances in environmental communication research, several gaps remain relevant to palm oil advocacy (Bukonya T., 2025). Limited studies have systematically examined the intersection of CSR strategies, digital transformation, and public perception in rapidly evolving corporate environments. Additionally, comprehensive evaluations of communication impact in certification processes, especially those focused on economic outcomes and communication effectiveness, remain scarce (Peteru et al., 2022; Zachlod et al., 2025).

The measurement and evaluation mechanisms for communication impact are identified as underdeveloped areas, with most campaigns failing to set clear KPIs for sentiment shifts, engagement levels, or media penetration (Trammell et al., 2025). This gap is particularly relevant for palm oil advocacy, where the complexity of supply chains and stakeholder relationships requires sophisticated measurement approaches to assess communication effectiveness (Mahajan et al., 2023; Peteru et al., 2022).

Research on rapid response protocols and real-time media monitoring systems to counter digital misinformation and disinformation campaigns remains limited. Given the increasing sophistication of coordinated attacks on palm oil sustainability certifications, this represents a critical area for future research and development (Peteru et al., 2022; Valentinov et al., 2025; Zachlod et al., 2025).

The literature reveals that while individual components of integrated communication

strategies have been studied extensively, comprehensive frameworks that combine unified narrative development, stakeholder coopetition, digital engagement, and measurement systems require further empirical validation (D’Orazio, 2022; Mahajan et al., 2023; Saka-Helmhout et al., 2024). This gap provides the foundation for continued research into how palm oil-producing countries can develop more effective advocacy strategies that address both local and global audiences while maintaining credibility and scientific accuracy (Bukanya T., 2025).

### 3 METHODOLOGY

This study adopts a qualitative literature review approach to examine how integrated communication strategies, with an emphasis on unified narrative and stakeholder coopetition, can address persistent negative campaigns targeting the palm oil sector. This approach is chosen for its flexibility in accommodating interdisciplinary insights and its strength in capturing the complexity of evolving communication ecosystems across diverse stakeholders (Mahajan et al., 2023; Orazi et al., 2017).

The review process involved identifying, interpreting, and synthesizing literature that contributes conceptually to understanding how narratives are shaped, contested, and coordinated in the context of palm oil advocacy. Rather than relying on rigid procedural frameworks, the review emphasised interpretive depth, allowing for the inclusion of various types of academic and non-academic sources, including policy briefs, institutional publications, and industry reports.

Literature was selected based on thematic relevance to integrated communication, stakeholder dynamics, and narrative strategy. The sources were categorised and analysed according to two core dimensions: the strategic potential of integrated communication frameworks in advocacy, and the dynamics of stakeholder interaction in aligning messaging (Mahajan et al., 2023; Orazi et al., 2017). This dual focus enabled a deeper understanding of both the enabling conditions and barriers to coordinated advocacy efforts in a contested policy and market environment (Papilo et al., 2022).

The analysis followed a thematic coding process to extract patterns related to narrative coherence, actor collaboration, framing techniques, message consistency, and audience engagement (Limaho et al., 2022). Special consideration was given to how different actors—governmental, industrial, civil society, and international—contribute to or resist unified advocacy efforts. Attention was also given to the socio-political contexts in which these communication strategies are deployed, recognizing that local realities often shape the efficacy of global narratives (Bevan et al., 2020).

This method does not involve empirical data collection, but rather draws insights from



existing literature to provide a conceptual map of the current advocacy landscape. It offers a critical reflection on how collaborative communication strategies may evolve, the structural and cultural factors that influence narrative success, and the potential pathways toward more effective stakeholder alignment (Mahajan et al., 2023). The qualitative nature of this review is intended to open up space for strategic rethinking rather than to prescribe fixed solutions.

## 4 RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

### 4.1 STRATEGIC COMMUNICATION CASE STUDIES IN PALM OIL ADVOCACY

To understand the practical implementation of integrated communication strategies within the palm oil sector, it is necessary to examine empirical cases that highlight both the successes and the shortfalls of current advocacy models (Bukenya T., 2025; Orazi et al., 2017). A notable example is the Indonesian government's "*Sawit Baik*" digital initiative, which aimed to transform public perception by highlighting the socioeconomic benefits of palm oil, particularly its contribution to rural employment and export income (Khairiza & Kusumasari, 2020; Silva et al., 2019). The campaign utilized social media platforms, infographics, and video testimonials from smallholder farmers to promote transparency and sustainability (Confetto et al., 2023; Rodak, 2020; Sulemana et al., 2025; Valentinov et al., 2025). However, it struggled to resonate with international audiences due to linguistic limitations and the absence of partnerships with global influencers or multilingual media outlets (Bennett, 2024; Briandana & Mohamad Saleh, 2022).

Another example includes a private-sector initiative in Malaysia, where several leading palm oil producers collaborated to launch a web-based storytelling platform showcasing their sustainability programs, including zero-burning land clearing and peatland rehabilitation projects (Abdul Majid et al., 2021; Satriawisti & Parung, 2024; Silva et al., 2019; Valentinov et al., 2025). These initiatives were supported by interactive timelines and geotagged maps, offering evidence of traceability and third-party audits (Kashmanian, 2017). While innovative, the lack of coordination with national communication strategies led to message fragmentation and reduced credibility in the face of coordinated NGO campaigns (Ardian et al., 2018; Duong, 2017; Gulliver et al., 2021).

Academic institutions and think tanks have also contributed to palm oil advocacy by publishing peer-reviewed studies and policy briefs that counteract misinformation around deforestation, biodiversity loss, and human rights abuses (Houghton et al., 2016; Jespersen et al., 2024). In one case, a university-led project partnered with local journalists to co-create articles and visual content for regional newspapers, aiming to rebuild trust with domestic audiences (Jenkins & Graves, 2019). This form of participatory storytelling increased local readership engagement by 40%, demonstrating the value of collaborative narrative construction (Hou, 2023;

Saka-Helmhout et al., 2024; Zainuddin et al., 2024).

Cross-sector collaboration has proven to be an effective framework for strategic environmental communication in Indonesia (Limaho et al., 2022). For instance, initiatives involving NGOs, palm oil companies, and community groups have implemented multi-stakeholder approaches to fire prevention through community engagement and awareness campaigns, contributing to reduced land and forest fires in vulnerable peatland areas (Ardian et al., 2018; Carmenta et al., 2021; Civera et al., 2025; Saka-Helmhout et al., 2024). These efforts, as part of broader sustainable palm oil advocacy, combined satellite imagery, local testimony, and regulatory documentation to present verified counter-narratives—later amplified by mainstream and digital media to challenge persistent negative campaigns (Civera et al., 2025; Yuwanto et al., 2024).

Despite these efforts, institutional fragmentation remains a central barrier. Inconsistencies between ministries overseeing trade, environment, and agriculture often result in conflicting statements during international negotiations or crises, such as the EU's deforestation regulation (Jespersen et al., 2024; Simonnet, 2023). This dissonance weakens the credibility of official communication and reinforces the perception of greenwashing (Astari et al., 2025; Koch & Denner, 2025).

To further complicate advocacy efforts, digital platforms often favor sensational anti-palm oil content that goes viral faster than nuanced, fact-based explanations (Wallis et al., 2021). Algorithms on platforms like Instagram and YouTube amplify emotionally charged messages, which are commonly deployed by activist organizations using imagery of deforestation or displaced wildlife (Amangeldi et al., 2024).

Yet, one successful counterexample emerged in Colombia, where a consortium of palm oil producers launched a regionally targeted influencer campaign that combined scientific data with local cultural narratives (Bevan et al., 2020; MENDEZ, 2017). This approach led to a measurable shift in consumer sentiment, with 18% of respondents reporting a more favorable view of certified palm oil within three months (Hobbs et al., 2022; Purnomo et al., 2023).

Monitoring and evaluation are also critical for assessing impact. Some organizations have implemented KPI-based frameworks to track media reach, sentiment analysis, and audience engagement metrics across channels (Basheer et al., 2024; Saka-Helmhout et al., 2024). These metrics allow stakeholders to adapt campaign strategies in real time, ensuring relevance and responsiveness (Chandel, 2024; Mahajan et al., 2023).

Another promising case emerged in Ghana, where local palm oil cooperatives engaged in mobile-based education campaigns to inform farmers about sustainability practices and certification standards (Brako et al., 2021; Suhardjo & Suparman, 2025; Syahza et al., 2018;

Valentinov et al., 2025). Using WhatsApp groups and voice messages in local languages, the program enhanced participation in RSPO training by over 30% (Macdonald & Balaton-Chrimes, 2016).

A final case of coopetition success is reflected in the Africa Sustainable Commodities Initiative (ASCI), which builds upon the Africa Palm Oil Initiative by uniting ten African countries to promote sustainable palm oil production. This platform facilitates joint engagement with international policymakers through coordinated messaging on trade equity and sustainability commitments (Saka-Helmhout et al., 2024; Valentinov et al., 2025; Wanzala & Obokoh, 2024; Zikargae, 2018). By centralizing narrative creation and media outreach, the alliance reportedly secured coverage in five major global news outlets during its first year—demonstrating the efficacy of unified regional advocacy in influencing global discourse (Bevan et al., 2020; Omta et al., 2014).

These examples highlight a recurring theme: the necessity for alignment across actors and platforms. Without shared narratives and structured partnerships, even high-quality content may fail to generate impact (Bevan et al., 2020; Panjwani et al., 2023). Thus, integrated communication must not only be creative and evidence-based but also systemic and collaborative in execution (Barker, 2013; Gulliver et al., 2021; Orazi et al., 2017).

## 4.2 CHALLENGES AND LIMITATIONS

Despite the growing recognition of the importance of strategic communication in palm oil advocacy, several persistent challenges hinder the effectiveness of unified narratives (Bukonya T., 2025). A significant limitation lies in the fragmented nature of stakeholder engagement across the palm oil value chain, where producers, processors, exporters, and governments often operate with divergent communication goals and agendas (Ardian et al., 2018; Imbiri et al., 2023; Saka-Helmhout et al., 2024). This dissonance dilutes message consistency and limits the development of a cohesive public-facing narrative (Bevan et al., 2020; Choiruzzad et al., 2021).

The credibility gap between industry actors and civil society further complicates advocacy efforts. Surveys conducted in Europe and North America reveal that more than 60% of consumers distrust sustainability claims made by palm oil companies, even when certifications such as RSPO or ISPO are present (Purnomo et al., 2023; Sinaga, 2022; Valentinov et al., 2025; Wulandari & Nasution, 2021). This lack of trust is partly driven by historical transparency issues and the perception of greenwashing, particularly on social and labor-related concerns (Corciolani et al., 2019; Ngan et al., 2022; Satriawisti & Parung, 2024; Suhardjo & Suparman, 2025; Sulemana et al., 2025).

Another structural limitation is the asymmetry of information power between anti-palm oil

campaigns and palm oil advocates. Non-governmental organizations and environmental lobbies often dominate digital media discourse through visually impactful and emotionally charged narratives, which gain more virality compared to fact-based industry communications (Bevan et al., 2020; Candellone et al., 2023; Dewi et al., 2024). This imbalance is exacerbated by algorithmic amplification on platforms like YouTube and Instagram, where sensational content spreads faster than nuanced explanations (Milli et al., 2025).

Additionally, there is limited integration of localized communication models that resonate with domestic audiences in producing countries. Most advocacy efforts remain externally oriented, aiming at international markets, and fail to mobilize domestic consumers, policymakers, or media in Indonesia, Malaysia, and Africa to become active defenders of sustainable palm oil (Papilo et al., 2022; Purnomo et al., 2023). As a result, national narratives are often reactive rather than proactive in shaping international discourse (Bevan et al., 2020; Partha & Nahar, 2023; Zikargae, 2018).

Institutional coordination challenges also persist among government bodies, particularly in reconciling trade, environment, and agricultural policies into a singular communication framework (Giles et al., 2021). For example, the lack of synergy between ministries responsible for forestry and commerce often leads to contradictory messaging during international disputes or trade bans (Saner, 2010).

Financial constraints further limit communication innovation. Smallholder organizations and palm oil cooperatives, which make up nearly 40% of the global palm oil supply, often lack access to media training, digital platforms, and crisis communication tools (Kalogiannidis et al., 2025; Purwadi et al., 2024; C. Reich & Musshoff, 2025). Their voices are underrepresented, despite their critical role in sustainable production (C. E. Reich & Musshoff, 2022; Tisselli, 2016).

In addition, the overreliance on traditional media (TV, print, and state-run channels) remains a bottleneck, especially when younger demographics consume content primarily via digital platforms and influencer-led campaigns (Nhedzi, 2018). Advocacy strategies rarely engage digital content creators or use data-driven audience segmentation to tailor messaging by age, geography, or interest (Bukanya T., 2025; Navarro, 2016).

Measurement and evaluation mechanisms for communication impact are also underdeveloped. Most campaigns fail to set clear KPIs such as sentiment shifts, engagement levels, or media penetration, making it difficult to assess effectiveness or adapt strategies accordingly (Saka-Helmhout et al., 2024; Saura et al., 2017). Although RSPO-certified practices have been broadly implemented, comprehensive evaluations following certification or outreach initiatives—especially those focused on economic outcomes and communication effectiveness—

are still scarce, with limited studies providing measurable insights or stakeholder-level evidence (Tey et al., 2021; Zachlod et al., 2025).

Furthermore, linguistic and cultural diversity within and across producing countries poses additional complexity. Messaging that resonates in Sumatra may not have the same effect in Kalimantan or Papua, let alone across countries like Nigeria, Colombia, or Thailand (Mingorría et al., 2014). Standardized messaging templates often ignore regional dialects, metaphors, or values, limiting emotional connection with local audiences (Rosa et al., 2017).

Digital misinformation and disinformation campaigns also pose an increasing threat to palm oil image-building. Several coordinated efforts have been observed, where bot-generated content or edited images are used to discredit sustainability certifications or spread false claims about deforestation rates (Hadi et al., 2024; Jespersen et al., 2024; Koh & Wilcove, 2009; Valentinov et al., 2025). These attacks often go unchallenged due to the absence of rapid response protocols and real-time media monitoring systems (Knudsen et al., 2023).

Finally, regulatory restrictions in destination markets such as the EU Deforestation-Free Regulation (EUDR) and the U.S. Lacey Act Amendment increase the burden on producing countries to communicate compliance while facing rising technical and administrative barriers (de Oliveira et al., 2024; Jespersen et al., 2024). These complex regulatory environments require robust, credible, and legally grounded communication strategies that many industry actors are not yet equipped to deliver (Grant et al., 1994).

There is also the risk of internal conflicts among stakeholders due to competition for funding, recognition, or market access, which limits coopetition—a synergy of cooperation and competition that should drive collective communication efforts (Rajala & Tidström, 2021). In practice, alliances are fragile, and unified messaging frequently breaks down during moments of crisis or scandal (Wahyuni, 2008).

Moreover, the absence of formalized communication hubs or centralized bodies to coordinate palm oil advocacy leads to duplication, inconsistencies, and gaps in response to emerging narratives (Bevan et al., 2020; Bukenya T., 2025; Sylvia et al., 2022). Without a permanent multi-stakeholder platform dedicated to media strategy, the sector remains vulnerable to external narrative domination (Civera et al., 2025; Wanner & Miljand, 2025).

## 5 CONCLUSION

The palm oil industry continues to face persistent challenges from negative campaigns, often driven by environmental concerns, socio-economic inequalities, and misperceptions in global narratives. While significant communication efforts have been initiated, a fragmented

approach among stakeholders has limited their long-term effectiveness. This review demonstrates that integrated communication strategies—anchored in a unified narrative and strengthened through coopetition among industry players, governments, civil society, media, and research institutions—are essential to counter these narratives in a credible and coordinated manner.

A shared storyline that aligns sustainability goals with economic and social realities can offer a powerful counterbalance to one-sided narratives. However, without stakeholder synergy, such narratives risk being dismissed as corporate propaganda. This makes coopetition—collaborative competition—a strategic necessity, allowing actors with overlapping interests but differing agendas to join forces without compromising their independence. When executed transparently, coopetition can enable stronger content creation, collective media engagement, and consistent messaging across markets and audiences.

Looking ahead, future advocacy must embrace digital storytelling, data-driven audience segmentation, and culturally sensitive messaging to reach global and regional audiences more effectively. Research institutions can play a vital role in supplying verified data to anchor communication in evidence, while governments must streamline policies that support coordinated responses. Efforts should also prioritize capacity-building for smallholders and grassroots communicators, who often remain excluded from the digital conversation.

The future of palm oil advocacy does not lie in reactive statements or defensive campaigns, but in proactive, unified, and empathetic engagement. Building trust among stakeholders and the public requires time, transparency, and a willingness to learn from past mistakes. Only then can the palm oil sector reclaim its narrative and reposition itself as a contributor to sustainable global development rather than its antagonist.

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