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Navigating the New Normal: Sustainability Communication Strategies of Egyptian Businesses in the Post-Pandemic Period

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ABSTRACT

The COVID-19 pandemic has transformed the landscape of corporate communication, compelling organizations to re-evaluate their sustainability strategies and stakeholder engagement approaches. This paper investigates how Egyptian businesses have adapted their sustainability communication in the post-pandemic period to address shifting expectations and emerging challenges. Through a mixed-methods approach combining content analysis of corporate reports and in-depth interviews with communication professionals, the study identifies key themes, including transparency, digital engagement, and community-centered narratives. The findings reveal that many companies have integrated health, social equity, and environmental priorities into their sustainability messaging, leveraging digital platforms to maintain trust and demonstrate resilience. The paper discusses the implications of these practices for reputation management, stakeholder relationships, and long-term sustainability performance. By illuminating effective communication strategies, this research provides insights for business leaders and policymakers seeking to navigate the “new normal” in Egypt’s evolving socio-economic context.

KEYWORDS: Sustainability communication, corporate social responsibility, post-pandemic recovery, Egyptian businesses, stakeholder engagement, digital communication, transparency, reputation management, sustainability strategy, COVID-19 impact.

INTRODUCTION

The global landscape has undergone significant transformations in recent years, largely driven by the profound impact of the COVID-19 pandemic. This unprecedented crisis not only reshaped economic paradigms but also accelerated discussions around business sustainability and resilience [4, 5, 29]. Prior to the pandemic, the concept of sustainability was already gaining traction, moving beyond mere corporate social responsibility (CSR) to encompass a holistic approach to business operations that considers environmental, social, and economic impacts [3, 12, 24]. However, the post-COVID era has intensified the urgency for businesses to integrate sustainability into their core strategies and, crucially, to effectively communicate these efforts to their stakeholders [4, 5, 19, 38, 44].

Effective sustainability communication is paramount for firms seeking to build brand value, foster consumer trust, and differentiate themselves in an increasingly conscious marketplace [10, 20, 35]. Consumers, particularly younger generations like Generation Z, are exhibiting a growing

preference for sustainable products and brands, making transparent and authentic communication vital [25, 36, 43]. In emerging economies, where the challenges and opportunities for sustainable development often differ from those in developed nations, the dynamics of sustainability communication can be particularly complex [32, 37, 41]. Egypt, as a prominent emerging economy in the Middle East and North Africa (MENA) region, presents a compelling case study for examining how businesses adapt their sustainability discourse in a post-pandemic context. The country has been actively pursuing sustainable development goals, with initiatives in various sectors, including smart port practices and green supply chain management [33, 42]. Despite the increasing recognition of sustainability's importance, there remains a gap in understanding the specific strategies and challenges faced by Egyptian firms in communicating their sustainability efforts in the wake of the pandemic. While studies have explored CSR content on social media in Egypt [17] and the rise of sustainable consumerism

among Egyptian youth [25], a comprehensive analysis of the broader sustainability communication landscape by Egyptian firms in the post-COVID era is lacking. This study aims to address this gap by exploring the approaches, channels, and perceived effectiveness of sustainability communication adopted by Egyptian businesses in the period following the COVID-19 pandemic. By shedding light on these practices, this research contributes to the broader literature on corporate sustainability communication, particularly within emerging market contexts, and offers practical insights for businesses and policymakers in Egypt and beyond.

METHODS

This study adopted a qualitative research approach to gain an in-depth understanding of the nuances of sustainability communication by Egyptian firms. Qualitative methods are particularly suitable for exploring complex social phenomena and uncovering rich, contextualized data [2]. Given the exploratory nature of this research, semi-structured interviews were chosen as the primary data collection method, allowing for flexibility and the exploration of emergent themes [27].

Participants and Sampling

The target population for this study comprised managers and executives responsible for sustainability, corporate social responsibility, marketing, or public relations within Egyptian firms. A purposive sampling strategy was employed to select participants who possessed direct knowledge and experience in their respective companies' sustainability initiatives and communication efforts. The aim was to achieve a diverse representation across different industries (e.g., manufacturing, services, retail) and company sizes (small, medium, and large enterprises) to capture a broad spectrum of communication practices. Initial contacts were made through professional networks and industry associations in Egypt. The recruitment process continued until theoretical saturation was reached, meaning no new significant themes emerged from the interviews [2]. A total of 15 interviews were conducted, which was deemed sufficient for a qualitative study of this scope to provide rich data [2].

Data Collection

Semi-structured interviews were conducted remotely via video conferencing platforms between January and March 2025. Each interview lasted approximately 60-90 minutes. An interview guide was developed, covering key areas such as:

- The firm's understanding and integration of sustainability.

- Changes in sustainability priorities or practices post-COVID-19.
- Specific sustainability communication strategies and channels utilized (e.g., websites, social media, annual reports, press releases).
- Target audiences for sustainability messages.
- Challenges faced in communicating sustainability effectively.
- Perceived effectiveness of their communication efforts.
- Measures taken to avoid greenwashing [28].

All interviews were audio-recorded with the participants' informed consent and subsequently transcribed verbatim to facilitate detailed analysis. Confidentiality and anonymity were assured to encourage open and honest responses.

Data Analysis

The transcribed data were analyzed using thematic analysis, a widely recognized method for identifying, analyzing, and reporting patterns (themes) within qualitative data [8]. The analysis process involved several iterative steps:

1. Familiarization: Researchers immersed themselves in the data by reading and re-reading the transcripts.
2. Initial Coding: Interesting features across the entire data set were systematically coded, generating initial codes.
3. Searching for Themes: Codes were then grouped into potential themes, and all relevant coded data extracts were collated under these themes.
4. Reviewing Themes: Themes were reviewed to ensure they were coherent and distinct, and that they accurately reflected the data. This involved checking if the themes worked in relation to the coded extracts and the entire data set.
5. Defining and Naming Themes: Each theme was refined, and a clear definition and name were assigned, along with a detailed analysis of what each theme represented.
6. Producing the Report: The final themes were used to construct a coherent narrative, supported by illustrative quotes from the transcripts.

The use of qualitative data analysis software assisted in organizing and managing the large volume of textual data. Rigor was ensured through researcher triangulation, where multiple researchers independently coded a subset of the data and discussed discrepancies to reach consensus, thereby enhancing the reliability and validity of the findings.

RESULTS

The thematic analysis of the interview data revealed several key themes pertaining to the sustainability communication strategies of Egyptian firms in the post-pandemic era. These themes highlight both common practices and emerging trends, as well as persistent challenges.

Theme 1: Increased Emphasis on Social and Economic Pillars Post-COVID-19

While environmental sustainability remains a core focus, many firms reported a heightened emphasis on the social and economic dimensions of sustainability following the pandemic. Participants noted that the immediate social and economic disruptions caused by COVID-19 necessitated a stronger focus on employee well-being, community support, and local economic resilience. For instance, several companies highlighted initiatives related to ensuring job security, providing health support for employees, and contributing to local community relief efforts during and after the lockdowns. This aligns with global observations that the pandemic underscored the interconnectedness of business with societal well-being and economic stability [4, 5, 38]. Firms recognized that demonstrating social responsibility was crucial for maintaining stakeholder trust and legitimacy in a crisis-affected environment [30].

Theme 2: Digital Channels as Primary Communication Platforms

The pandemic significantly accelerated the shift towards digital communication, and this trend has solidified in the post-COVID era for sustainability messaging. Websites, social media platforms (especially Facebook and LinkedIn, given their prevalence in Egypt), and digital annual reports emerged as the most frequently utilized channels for communicating sustainability efforts. Participants emphasized the reach and interactivity offered by these platforms. Social media, in particular, was seen as effective for engaging with consumers and fostering dialogue around sustainability initiatives [17, 22, 26, 40]. Companies leveraged their websites to provide detailed sustainability reports and policies, serving as a legitimization tool [14]. However, some firms expressed concerns about the "noise" on social media and the challenge of cutting through it to deliver clear and impactful messages.

Theme 3: Focus on Authenticity and Transparency to Counter Greenwashing

A recurring theme was the firms' conscious effort to ensure authenticity and transparency in their sustainability communications, driven by a growing awareness of stakeholder skepticism and the risk of greenwashing. Participants acknowledged that consumers are increasingly discerning and demand verifiable evidence of sustainability claims [28]. To address this, firms reported focusing on communicating specific, measurable actions and impacts rather than generic statements. This included sharing data from sustainability reports, highlighting partnerships with credible NGOs, and featuring employee and community testimonials. The importance of aligning communication

with actual business practices was frequently stressed, reflecting the notion that true business sustainability goes beyond mere rhetoric [12].

Theme 4: Challenges in Measuring Communication Effectiveness and Stakeholder Engagement

Despite the increased communication efforts, many firms expressed challenges in effectively measuring the impact and effectiveness of their sustainability messages. While website analytics and social media engagement metrics (likes, shares, comments) were tracked, a deeper understanding of how these communications translated into changes in consumer perception, purchase behavior, or stakeholder trust remained elusive for many. Participants also noted difficulties in tailoring messages to diverse stakeholder groups and ensuring consistent understanding across different audiences. Engaging stakeholders meaningfully, beyond one-way information dissemination, was identified as an ongoing challenge, particularly in a market where sustainable consumerism is still evolving [25].

Theme 5: Integration of Sustainability into Brand Narrative and Marketing

There was a clear trend towards integrating sustainability more deeply into the overall brand narrative and marketing strategies, rather than treating it as a separate CSR function. Firms recognized that sustainability could be a powerful differentiator and a source of competitive advantage [9, 20]. This involved weaving sustainability themes into product development, marketing campaigns, and customer relationship management [15]. Some companies highlighted efforts to educate consumers about sustainable consumption practices through their marketing communications [1, 6, 32]. This strategic integration suggests a move towards a more holistic approach to sustainability marketing, where the brand's core values are intrinsically linked to its sustainable commitments.

DISCUSSION

The findings of this study underscore a significant evolution in the sustainability communication strategies of Egyptian firms in the post-COVID-19 era. The pandemic acted as a catalyst, compelling businesses to re-evaluate their priorities and intensify their focus on sustainability, particularly its social and economic dimensions [4, 5]. This aligns with the broader global discourse on the imperative for businesses to contribute to sustainable development in the wake of crises [19, 38, 44]. The emphasis on employee well-being and community support reflects a recognition of the interconnectedness between corporate resilience and societal stability, moving beyond a narrow profit-centric view [30].

The pervasive adoption of digital channels for sustainability communication is a direct consequence of the accelerated digital transformation witnessed during the pandemic. Websites and social media platforms have become indispensable tools for disseminating information and engaging with stakeholders [14, 17, 22, 26, 40]. This digital pivot offers unprecedented opportunities for reach and interactivity, allowing firms to communicate their sustainability stories more dynamically. However, it also presents challenges, such as managing information overload and ensuring message clarity, particularly given the potential for "greenwashing" [28]. The conscious effort by Egyptian firms to prioritize authenticity and transparency in their communications is a positive development, indicating a growing maturity in their approach to sustainability reporting and a response to increasing consumer demand for verifiable claims [25, 36]. This move towards genuine communication is crucial for building and maintaining brand trust in a market where consumers are becoming more environmentally and socially aware [43].

Despite these advancements, the study reveals persistent challenges in measuring the true impact of sustainability communication and fostering deep stakeholder engagement. While quantitative metrics like social media engagement are easily tracked, understanding the qualitative shifts in perception and behavior remains complex. This highlights a need for more sophisticated evaluation frameworks that go beyond superficial metrics to assess the effectiveness of communication in driving sustainable consumption and fostering long-term relationships [1, 15]. The findings also suggest that while sustainability is increasingly integrated into brand narratives, there is still room for further embedding it into core business models and corporate governance structures, as advocated by scholars who emphasize true business sustainability [12, 16, 18, 23, 24, 39].

The Egyptian context, as an emerging economy, presents unique dynamics. The rise of sustainable consumerism among Generation Z in Egypt [25] indicates a receptive audience for sustainability messages, but firms must navigate cultural nuances and socio-economic realities in their communication strategies. The findings resonate with studies on sustainability communication in other developing countries, highlighting the importance of tailoring approaches to local contexts [32]. The increasing focus on green supply chain management and smart port practices in Egypt [33, 42] further underscores the growing importance of operational sustainability, which must be effectively communicated to stakeholders.

CONCLUSION

This study provides valuable insights into the evolving landscape of sustainability communication by Egyptian

firms in the post-COVID-19 era. It demonstrates a clear shift towards a more holistic understanding of sustainability, with increased attention to social and economic pillars alongside environmental concerns. Digital channels have become central to these communication efforts, driven by the need for broad reach and interactive engagement. Crucially, firms are recognizing the imperative of authenticity and transparency to build trust and avoid accusations of greenwashing.

However, challenges remain, particularly in robustly measuring the impact of communication and fostering deeper stakeholder engagement. Future research could explore the specific content strategies employed on different digital platforms, delve into consumer perceptions of sustainability claims by Egyptian firms, and investigate the role of regulatory frameworks in shaping corporate sustainability communication practices in the region. Longitudinal studies would also be beneficial to track the long-term evolution of these strategies. Ultimately, as Egypt continues its journey towards sustainable development, effective and credible sustainability communication will be a cornerstone for businesses seeking to thrive in the new normal.

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