



Constructing Public Engagement Through Environmental Communication: Corporate Narratives on Plastic-Free Shopping in Indonesia

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Abstract. The retail industry has become the focus of public engagement analysis regarding the plastic waste crisis in Indonesia, launching environmental awareness campaigns such as "No Plastic Glitters Shopping" and encouraging the use of eco-friendly shopping bags. The purpose of this study is to analyze the representation of public involvement in environmental awareness. Next, to analyze the framing of environmental actions and narrative tone in corporate environmental communication in media narratives and official company releases. Qualitative analysis method of the text of 15 news articles and press releases from 2020–2024. This study found that several retailers explicitly expressed environmental awareness manifested in transactional relationships with consumers, such as Alfamart, included in product and service commitments, such as AZKO and IKEA. Consumer engagement is constructed symbolically and substantively through moral appeals and consumptive choices. Narrative tones in campaign texts vary among several corporations, some using imperative, persuasive, or ceremonial tones. However, they do not involve dialogic participation. However, corporate narratives are not persuasive in building substantive dialogic participation. These findings enrich the study of environmental communication and corporate legitimacy in sustainability issues.

Keywords: corporate narratives, environmental action, environmental communication, green retail, public engagement

1 Introduction

Most environmental problems are caused by human consumption behavior, which is now beginning to be recognized as a need for improvement and an environmental responsibility (Gupta & Agrawal, 2018). Public engagement is growing to save the planet. This can be done in a simple way for consumers, simply by carrying eco-friendly shopping bags. Everyone has a role to play in preserving a blue and green earth. Nowadays, shopping and consumption behavior is gaining more attention because it can be seen as part of activism and an expression of citizenship that loves the environment. Everyone can play a role in only purchasing and consuming 'green' or 'ethical' goods,

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known as sustainable consumption (Seyfang, 2013). Mass public involvement throughout the world will have a tremendous impact on improving human management of the planet.

In addition to shopping in-store with eco-friendly shopping bags, online shopping is also a concern because shipping requires adequate packaging to ensure the safety of goods until they reach their destination. Previous studies on sustainable consumption and wellbeing have noted the increasing trend of online shopping, demonstrating empirical evidence that online shopping practices aim to reduce the environmental impact of travel, heating, cooling, and product consumption. Online shopping activities will increase consumption efficiency, expand choices and information, and increase exposure to consumerist and materialistic messages (Guillen-Royo, 2019).

Various previous studies have addressed the issue of human responsibility towards the environment and planet Earth. Some have focused on investigating consumer behavior related to product reduction, reuse, and recycling (Moraes et al., 2009; Pappoikonomou, 2013); purchasing behavior of less hazardous, energy-efficient, recycled, organic, and similar products (Gilg, Barr, & Ford, 2005; Kim et al., 2012); and generally regarding environmentally responsible consumption behavior (Agrawal & Gupta, 2018). However, these previous studies have focused less on corporate action and narratives regarding environmental concerns on the one hand and public engagement on the other hand, which welcomes the Joint Movement to restore the planet Earth, particularly in the retail industry. This paper takes a role in complementing these shortcomings by analyzing both sides in the context of the retail industry in Indonesia, both offline and online shopping, from the perspective of environmental communication studies.

Indonesia is one of the world's largest contributors to plastic waste, a fact that all stakeholders, including the retail industry, are beginning to recognize. Over the past decade, the "No Plastic Glitters Shopping" communication campaign emerged as an industry initiative aimed at social change through pro-environmental behavior. This is a challenging mission, given that public attitudes, actions, and behaviors remain minimally environmentally conscious due to low levels of education. Corporations strive to develop narrative-based messaging to foster awareness within individual consumers, which can then broadly grow into a positive social movement.

Several research questions addressed in this paper include: 1) How does corporate environmental communication frame public engagement? 2) how does narrative strategy position the public as agents of environmental change? Furthermore, the discussion aims to: 1) analyze corporate environmental communication in the retail industry, framing public engagement as part of a social movement. 2) analyze corporate communication narrative strategies in positioning the public as agents of environmental change.

2 Literature Review

2.1 Public Engagement in Environmental Issues

The relationship between humans and nature is reflected in the thoughts, attitudes, actions, and behavior of humans as beings responsible for managing and utilizing resources on planet Earth. Humans are born, grow, and develop from generation to generation, thus requiring stable and increasingly better thoughts and actions for their environment. Interactivity and shared values in environmental communication are efforts to convey information, influence attitudes, and shape behavior related to ecological issues. Environmental issues require aggregate human awareness through public involvement to find solutions to environmental issues and conduct education for preventive purposes. Environmental issues are not only about awareness, but also participation in the decision-making process, both in business organizations, governments, communities, and environmental advocates (Höppner & Whitmarsh, 2012; Rowe & Frewer, 2005).

Reed et al. (2018) illustrated the 'wheel of participation' as a typology for defining public engagement across various stakeholder types with four modes of engagement. They identified four types of engagement: top-down one-way communication and/or consultation, top-down deliberation and/or co-production, bottom-up one-way communication and/or consultation, and bottom-up deliberation and/or co-production. Public engagement in environmental and planetary concerns and actions has grown from the awareness of intellectuals, which continues to spread to the general public, and from corporations, which construct narratives to engage the public or consumers. The risks posed by climate change, for example, are becoming increasingly apparent, creating an urgency to involve the public in addressing these shared risks (Corner et al., 2014).

2.2 Framing and Symbolic Participation

This study considers the basis of Robert Entman's Framing Theory, arguing that media messages about sustainability and environmental concerns are understood by audiences through media channels. Audiences select and emphasize certain aspects of reality, shaping how people perceive and react to the information they receive (Suldovsky & Frank, 2022). According to Entman (1993), the four main functions of framing are defining problems, diagnosing causes, making moral judgments, and suggesting solutions. Cox (2007) then links framing by defining economic communication as a pragmatic and constitutive vehicle for audience understanding of the environment. Environmental issues are symbolic channels used to construct the environment, and human communication is a symbolic action. In the context of environmental campaigns, public participation is often framed symbolically, encouraging the public to act morally without a truly participatory space (Boström & Klintman, 2008). Symbolic action frames are properties of language and supporting properties such as art, photographs, street protests, scientific reports, and others. Furthermore, communication activities actively

shape understanding in seeing the natural world through symbols, such as words, images, or narratives, which create meaning, influence, and direct viewers to a wider world (Kazakova, 2009).

2.3 Corporate Environmental Communication

Corporate image requires social legitimacy to gain public recognition and engagement, so sustainability communication has become part of the objective strategy. On the consumer and public side, various human communication actions have influenced how audiences perceive, change, and attempt to restore relationships with everything we consider "the environment" (Pezzullo & Cox, 2025). Green campaigns are part of an integrated communication strategy with an emphasis on sustainability to achieve a positive image in the public mind and as a mechanism for controlling the public narrative (Ramírez et al., 2019; Suchman, 1995). Various companies adopt a green corporate perspective to demonstrate their commitment to environmental concerns, as evidenced by periodic corporate reports regarding relevant SDGs (Mason & Mason, 2012). Companies are concerned with both social and non-social stakeholders for organizational sustainability through initiatives such as corporate social responsibility (CSR) and corporate sustainability (CS). Environmental sustainability is now growing as a major expectation (Ramya, Shereen, & Baral, 2020).

3 Research Method

3.1 Data Collection

This study uses a qualitative text analysis approach to news documents, articles, visual campaigns, Instagram content, and websites. The data sources consist of 15 articles from online news portals and official press releases from retail companies, published between 2020 and 2024. Articles, news, and press releases were obtained from several official media portals, including Kompas.com, Detik.com, Liputan6.com, and the corporate websites of Alfamart, Indomaret, Ranch Market, Gramedia, IKEA, and others. Visual campaign formats on Instagram and YouTube were used to supplement the data investigated from 2020 to 2024.

Some of the keywords used were: "eco-friendly shopping bags," "eco-friendly shopping bags," "no plastic," "no shiny plastic," and "no plastic program."

3.2 Data Analysis

This qualitative research approach is text-based, analyzing arguments about corporate environmental communication. Communication messages serve as symbolic mechanisms of public engagement through dialogic participatory practices. The procedure combines framing analysis (Entman, 1993), typologies of public engagement (Rowe & Frewer, 2005), and corporate legitimacy theory (Suchman, 1995). The methodological design focuses on examining corporate narratives related to the environment, with consumers' moral responsibility at its core. The choice of a methodological mix goes be-

yond measuring campaign effectiveness to critically examine the discursive construction of public engagement more broadly. Underlying this lies the tension between corporate claims of sustainability commitment and top-down, non-deliberative forms of public participation.

A content analysis of environmental narratives was conducted using a systematic qualitative approach. The research company used a plastic-free shopping initiative as the main theme to: 1) identify relevant corporate communication materials such as official websites, sustainability reports, social media posts, and campaign visuals on Instagram. Corporate communications were explicitly selected with categories such as “plastic reduction,” “reusable consumption practices,” and “environmental responsibility.” 2) The next step was to code all texts inductively and deductively related to “environmental communication” and “public engagement” in the form of invitations, appeals, framing narratives, moral messages, corporate actions, and the presence of consumer agency. 3) The data were organized into thematic categories to examine dominant narrative patterns and corporate discursive strategies. Finally, 4) interpret the constructed narratives as the meaning of environmental responsibility and their relationship to public engagement regarding the alignment between discourse, cultural practices, and the prioritized sustainability values.

4 Results and Discussions

4.1 Environmental Initiatives and Communications

Retail companies in Indonesia, both local and global brands, communicate and transact with consumers by prioritizing environmental awareness. Internal company regulations are formulated and prepared to foster social engineering in fostering attitudes, actions, and behaviors that embrace environmental care programs, recycling, green products, shopping bags, and environmental friendliness. Consumer shopping practices are reflected in waste management policies, the use of eco-friendly bags, green products, and recycling initiatives. The following analysis is based on the type of retailer, as follows:

Indomaret management announced its environmental commitment by eliminating plastic shopping bags in July 2009. This step involved replacing conventional plastic bags with degradable, oxygen-free plastic, which can decompose in approximately two years. This corporate policy was intended to support Indomaret's Waste Management Law No. 18/2008.

Alfamart further implemented the corporate action by implementing the "Kampung Alfamart Sahabat Bumi" (KASB) program. This strategic objective involves engaging consumers and the public in reducing single-use plastic, recycling, community empowerment, tree planting, waste bank management, and sustainable water conservation. Alfamart's commitment is also demonstrated by the implementation of solar power plants (PLTS) in many offices and warehouses, which have reduced carbon emissions by >462 tons and coal reduction by >187 tons until September 2022. For these efforts, Alfamart received the TrenAsia ESG Award 2023 and was named "Retail Driver of Environmental Sustainability" at the Detikcom Awards 2024. Alfamart is committed to renewable energy, greening, and reducing plastic waste. This example is reinforced by holding household waste management training in the context of World Environment Day. In

line at the cashier, Nit (27 years old, a shopper) said: “Now I carry a shopping bag everywhere, so it’s easier to stop by the minimarket to shop. I avoid using plastic bags.”

At several minimarkets, such as Circle K and FamilyMart, no documentation regarding company policies was found, but rather a direct practice of shopping without plastic bags. Similarly, at supermarket and hypermarket retailers—such as Hypermart, Lotte Mart, TransMart Carrefour, Grand Lucky, and Hero Supermarket—no reports or company initiatives related to environmental care, recycling, or green products were found on their official websites. Likewise, no information was found regarding environmental care policies in the Department Store category, such as Matahari Department Store and Ramayana.

The issue of caring for the environment and saving the blue planet is a global issue and is increasingly voiced abroad. Several foreign retailers operating in Indonesia have been steadfast in prioritizing strategic programs in the environmental sector. IKEA, as one of the specialty stores, launched the Blue Bag Project, an eco-friendly shopping action whose proceeds are donated to sanitation in Jakarta. This Swedish retailer provides Removal and Recycling services for old furniture to reduce waste. The restaurant at IKEA is a visitor favorite, and this specialty store recognizes the importance of educating consumers. Through the Food is Precious Initiative and the children's book 'Bana: The Banana on the Walk', IKEA educates about food waste management, together with the Swedish Embassy and the Greeneration Foundation. In its testimony, IKEA also collaborates with WWF until 2025 for forest conservation, resource management, and a sustainable supply chain. IKEA's eco-friendly products include Kungsbacka, Alseda, Tating that recycled materials including PET bottles and banana fiber, Frakta: reusable shopping bags, Minnen: adjustable bed frame, LED lighting that saves up to 85% energy, and the Kaseberga collection made from recycled and renewable materials.

Another foreign specialty store, ACE Hardware, from the United States, commits to sustainability: energy optimization (100% LED lighting), elevator reduction, RO water treatment, waste management with sorting and public education, and environmentally friendly products and packaging. ACE Hardware also has a corporate policy, not providing single-use plastic bags, but offering free used cardboard or reusable shopping bags. Since 2025, ACE Hardware changed its name to AZKO because the license from Ace Hardware Corporation, Oak Brook, Illinois, USA, has expired until 2024. AZKO continues its environmental policies that are familiar to its consumers, such as offering products such as the EKO Recycling Bin to help separate household waste. Other specialty stores, such as Gramedia bookstores, did not find any environmental awareness policy or documents.

4.2 Representation of Public Involvement

The public largely depends on who controls the media to voice environmental care initiatives. Given that the majority of Indonesia's population is still at secondary school level, these initiatives tend to be top-down. From the 15 text documents analyzed, two issues can be discussed, including:

First, consumer participation as agents of change. Changing people's minds, attitudes, actions, and behavior requires agents of change. Retail consumers can be a consciously selected group of people to serve as role models and convey messages about reducing plastic use through Bring Your Own Bag (BYOB) schemes, discount incentives, or loyalty points. Corporations consciously and deliberately carry out social change through in-store and out-of-store communications. This narrative frames consumers as the primary actors who can change shopping behavior for the environment.

Second, corporations not only directly engage and transact with consumers but also build partnerships with key communities, and with the assistance of Non-Governmental Organizations (NGOs). Several documents highlight collaborations between retailers and environmental communities, such as beach cleanup campaigns or tree or mangrove forest planting. This corporate communication model emphasizes the company's image as a facilitator, connecting the private sector, the community, and non-profit organizations.

Third, symbolic versus substantive engagement. Some retail corporations prioritize symbolic engagement with their consumers by embracing national and global themes, such as World Environment Day. Others work by offering sustainable programs in their transactions. For example, a corporation might replace all plastic bags with recycled bags during a promotional period.

4.3 Framing of Environmental Actions and Narrative Tone

A framing analysis of environmental awareness documents among retail companies is crucial for delving into their narratives. Corporate communications are aimed at all stakeholders, especially consumers, reciprocally. Corporations do not have the right to dictate and control consumers' positions in the economic cycle; they must be equal. The framing patterns of retailers' environmental communications and actions combine several aspects, such as regulation, education, and corporate image. Three main narratives were found in the 15 documents:

First, the imperative tone. Corporations use an imperative tone in their communications to stakeholders due to the mandatory nature of the policies, which must be implemented within a specific timeframe. For example, "Starting January 1, 2021, we will not provide single-use plastic shopping bags," followed by a command or strong appeal, "Bring your own shopping bag every time you shop," or "Let's get used to bringing our own environmentally friendly shopping bags." The imperative tone serves to assert the company's authority while simultaneously aligning with local/national government policies. The announcement is accompanied by a regulation number near the cashier.

Second, a persuasive tone. Corporations engage consumers with language that encourages readers to think logically about a shared future, such as "Let's save the earth together" or "Every small step you take means a lot for the environment." Some retailers display posters depicting the caring stories of employees, customers, or communities, using engaging storytelling to illustrate how success was achieved through a plastic-free lifestyle.

Third, a ceremonial tone. At certain events or national holidays, while communicating promotions and discounts, retailers use them as opportunities for program

launches, Earth Day celebrations, annual CSR publications, and various national holidays. Retailers leverage these opportunities to communicate with the public, with narratives that tend to highlight achievements, award certificates, and the presence of officials or public figures. Consumer attendance is induced by discount programs, and the event is symbolic and representative rather than encouraging direct action.

The findings suggest that it is not corporate initiatives that are prominent, but rather the emergence of environmental communication patterns, with the inclusion of consistent public engagement practices that support these concerns. However, these social choices and practices are framed morally, not as participatory processes. Narratives found in several retail categories position consumers as compliant and environmentally responsible actors through transactional practices, including willingness to bring reusable shopping bags and accept corporate policy changes. Meanwhile, structural decision-making remains centralized within corporate authority. This analytical focus reveals variations in communication narratives, including imperative, persuasive, and ceremonial ones. Corporate communication does not substantially alter the model of public engagement. Instead, these narrative variations serve as discursive strategies to legitimize corporate sustainability claims. This is despite the top-down control of power within the company regarding the environmental agenda. These findings highlight the systemic tension between symbolic inclusion and substantive participation. This goes beyond discussions of corporate action to explore how engagement itself is communicatively constructed and constrained.

5 Conclusion

Not all Indonesian retail industries have officially prioritized environmental awareness. Corporations such as Alfamart at the local level, also AZKO, and IKEA at the global level, have conducted extensive environmental initiatives and communications. At the supermarket and hypermarket level, environmental initiatives have not been explicitly found in corporate communications.

The representation of public involvement in environmental awareness campaigns is reflected in the targeted message that consumer participation is an agent of change. Corporations still to partner with their customers in understanding and fostering environmental awareness, as well as collaborating with NGOs. Retailers prioritize both symbolic and substantive consumer involvement within the framework of sustainable business and the environment.

The corporate communication narrative is reflected in the messages conveyed to the public regarding environmental awareness. The construction of public involvement in the "No Plastic Glitters Shopping" campaign was carried out using a symbolic and moralistic approach. The communication of the environmental narrative remains one-way and top-down, despite the urgent need for a communication format that provides space for equal dialogue to build collaborative participation. This involvement is largely symbolic and consumption-driven. The public's role is framed around compliance and support, rather than collective participation or policy influence.

The implications of this research relate to three things. First, companies need to develop two-way communication and community dialogue. Second, the government can promote regulations that broaden the meaning of public participation. Finally, further research can explore public perceptions directly.

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