

GREEN PUBLIC RELATIONS STRATEGIES FOR ACHIEVING SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT GOALS IN MALAYSIA: A STAKEHOLDER THEORY PERSPECTIVE

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Abstract

This study examines Green Public Relations (GPR) as a strategic communication tool for advancing Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) in Malaysia. Anchored in Stakeholder Theory and Carroll's Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR) Pyramid, this conceptual paper identifies critical gaps between sustainability awareness and stakeholder behaviors, highlighting the persistent challenge of greenwashing. The research critiques traditional one-size-fits-all GPR strategies and proposes a culturally-tailored communication model emphasizing ethical transparency and stakeholder engagement. Through a qualitative design involving semi-structured interviews with 12 elite informants from corporate, governmental, and NGO sectors, supplemented by thematic analysis of sustainability reports using NVivo, this study develops a strategic GPR framework that bridges rhetorical sustainability claims with measurable impacts. The proposed model contributes to stakeholder-centric sustainability communication theory and offers practical guidance for Malaysian organizations aligning with the UN 2030 Agenda. This research advances GPR scholarship by demonstrating how culturally-contextualized communication strategies can enhance stakeholder trust, foster collaborative efforts, and accelerate sustainable development achievement in emerging economies.

Keywords: Green Public Relations, Sustainable Development Goals, Stakeholder Theory, Malaysia, Sustainability Communication, Corporate Social Responsibility, Strategic Communication.

1. INTRODUCTION

The global community confronts an unprecedented convergence of climate crisis, social inequities, and economic volatility that demands urgent, coordinated action aligned with the United Nations 2030 Agenda (Lin et al., 2025). The 17 Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) provide a comprehensive framework for sustainable development that extends beyond technological innovation and regulatory compliance to encompass transformative changes in organizational behavior and stakeholder engagement (Agrawal et al., 2022). Within this context, Green Public Relations (GPR) has emerged as a critical strategic tool for fostering behavioral change through effective sustainability communication (Dagestani et al., 2025).

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Unlike traditional public relations, which often emphasizes short-term image management, GPR focuses on the ethical dissemination of environmental values and long-term promotion of sustainable practices (Fawkes, 2021). Through strategic narratives, GPR cultivates environmental stewardship cultures that resonate with diverse stakeholder audiences. As digital communication landscapes evolve, sustainability has become a non-negotiable component of organizational legitimacy, essential for maintaining social licenses to operate (Krishnan, 2015). Contemporary stakeholders increasingly demand that corporations transition from profit-centric models to frameworks integrating Environmental, Social, and Governance (ESG) principles (Lin et al., 2025).

The Malaysian Context and Research Problem

Malaysia demonstrates institutional commitment to SDGs through national policies including the Twelfth Malaysia Plan, yet implementation faces significant challenges stemming from stakeholder awareness-behavior gaps (Buniamin et al., 2021). Despite relatively high levels of general sustainability knowledge among Malaysian populations, this awareness fails to translate into meaningful engagement with green programs. This disjuncture proves especially pronounced in corporate contexts, where substantial gaps exist between organizational discourse and quantifiable sustainability performance (Buniamin et al., 2021).

The prevalence of greenwashing strategic GPR deployed to create environmentally friendly impressions without substantive ecological actions undermines SDG credibility, fostering stakeholder skepticism that ultimately impedes national progress toward sustainability objectives (Dagestani et al., 2025). This represents a critical challenge for Malaysian organizations operating within the nation's diverse multi-ethnic landscape, where culturally-sensitive communication strategies prove essential for effective stakeholder engagement (Khalil et al., 2024).

Research Objectives

This conceptual paper critically assesses how GPR strategies influence stakeholder engagement and how these strategies can be optimized to accelerate SDG attainment in Malaysia. Grounded in Stakeholder Theory, this research examines relationships between Malaysian organizations and diverse stakeholder populations, enabling development of ethically-grounded communication frameworks. The study addresses two primary research objectives:

1. To examine the role of strategic sustainability communication, including Public Relations and Green Reporting, in disseminating SDG information and raising stakeholder awareness.
2. To evaluate how Green Public Relations strategies engage stakeholders in advancing SDG-related initiatives within the Malaysian context.

By employing a robust qualitative approach, this study provides depth necessary to examine these multifaceted relational phenomena in real-world contexts, ensuring the proposed model achieves both conceptual rigor and practical utility for practitioners.

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

Theoretical Foundations: Stakeholder Theory and CSR

This research employs an integrated theoretical framework combining Stakeholder Theory with Carroll's CSR Pyramid to comprehensively analyze GPR as both relational and ethical practice. Stakeholder Theory identifies the actors engaged in organizational communication, while Carroll's model encompasses the content dimensions of that communication (Waheed & Zhang, 2022). Together, these frameworks create a cohesive system for understanding strategic communication's role in promoting behavioral change and facilitating SDG realization.

Stakeholder Theory posits that organizational success depends on effectively managing relationships with diverse stakeholder groups whose support proves essential for achieving strategic objectives (Awa et al., 2024). In emerging economy contexts like Malaysia, environmentalism often intersects with developmental progress and socio-economic stability concerns, requiring nuanced stakeholder identification and engagement strategies (Shah et al., 2020). Carroll's CSR Pyramid provides a hierarchical framework encompassing economic, legal, ethical, and philanthropic responsibilities, offering structure for GPR message development that resonates across stakeholder segments (Waheed & Zhang, 2022).

Evolution of Green Public Relations in Malaysia

Malaysia's public relations environment has undergone significant transformation, evolving from traditional media relations and press agency toward sophisticated strategic approaches embodied in Green Public Relations (Dagestani et al., 2025). Initially, environmental communication in Malaysian contexts proved largely reactive, serving as peripheral marketing strategy addressing industrial crises. However, as Malaysia's corporate sector matured, proactive sustainability discourse became increasingly necessary, reflecting growing recognition that organizational credibility now depends not solely on financial performance but increasingly on environmental stewardship (Dagestani et al., 2025).

This evolution manifests most clearly in Malaysia's manufacturing, tourism, and energy sectors, where ESG principles have become institutionalized through regulatory frameworks including Bursa Malaysia's Sustainability Reporting Guide, which mandates listed companies disclose material sustainability risks and opportunities (Dagestani et al., 2025). Consequently, GPR in these industries has shifted from generic environmental claims toward data-driven narratives meeting global ESG requirements. In energy and manufacturing sectors particularly, GPR articulates decarbonization initiatives and supply chain ethics to skeptical stakeholders, with strategies emphasizing two-way symmetrical communication and co-creation of sustainability objectives with communities rather than unilateral imposition (Waheed & Zhang, 2022).

GPR and the Sustainable Development Goals

A core function of contemporary GPR involves translating abstract, multifaceted United Nations SDGs into actionable, localized messages for diverse audiences (Dirie et al., 2023). The 2030 Agenda offers comprehensive structure that many organizations struggle to navigate without expert intervention. GPR professionals serve as translators, mapping organizational activities to

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corresponding SDGs including climate action (SDG 13) and responsible consumption and production (SDG 12) thereby enhancing transparency and demonstrating measurable impact (Dirie et al., 2023).

By framing international goals within local Malaysian contexts, GPR helps stakeholders understand their personal and communal contributions toward national sustainability objectives, building common impact language transcending high-level policy rhetoric to motivate ground-level contributions across society sectors (Le et al., 2024). However, GPR must navigate ethical complexities inherent in sustainability messaging, ensuring SDG-oriented communications reflect genuine corporate impact rather than superficial promotion. Message authenticity proves paramount: as organizations enhance brand image through sustainable corporate practices, their narratives require substantive support (Daniel-Vasconcelos et al., 2023).

Strategic GPR entails developing comprehensive roadmaps where sustainability integrates as core organizational component rather than peripheral activity (Daniel-Vasconcelos et al., 2023). Yet pressure toward green positioning creates ethical challenges where boundaries between advocacy and deception blur easily. Practitioner ethical standards must prioritize transparency and accountability, as failures risk greenwashing accusations that damage both organizational and SDG credibility (Fawkes, 2021). Thus GPR functions simultaneously as promotional tool and ethical gatekeeper for sustainability initiatives.

Communication Strategies and Stakeholder Engagement

Malaysian institutions increasingly adopt hybrid approaches combining traditional and digital communication strategies to drive stakeholder participation in sustainability programs. Storytelling has emerged as particularly effective GPR technique, enabling organizations to humanize complex environmental data and generate emotional stakeholder responses (Khalil et al., 2024). By establishing and communicating narratives through diverse media platforms, organizations face major challenges and opportunities in implementing GPR to promote SDGs within Malaysian contexts (Zihan et al., 2024).

Digital platforms present distinctive opportunities for interactive engagement, facilitating shifts from one-way broadcasting toward participatory communication essential for building enduring relationships that enable sustainability initiatives to take root in public consciousness (Krishnan, 2015). Additionally, GPR practices increasingly embrace influencer and community outreach to reach traditionally cynical demographic groups regarding corporate messages, leveraging social influencers sharing environmental values to access established trust networks and spread sustainable practices more authentically (Khalil et al., 2024).

Through localized, community-based communication, GPR enables individuals to develop ownership regarding sustainability targets in their respective neighborhoods, shifting focus from global requirements to local interests while demonstrating that SDG attainment directly improves Malaysian residents' quality of life (Khalil et al., 2024). This multi-channel strategy ensures

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sustainability messages achieve ubiquity, cultural specificity, and capacity to mobilize stakeholders with diverse interests around shared environmental and social objectives.

Gaps in Current Research

Despite increasing organizational sustainability relevance, substantial gaps exist in literature regarding empirical Green Public Relations performance in Southeast Asia, particularly Malaysia (Ismail & Latiff, 2019). Current studies concentrate heavily on technical corporate social responsibility aspects and sustainability reporting mechanisms, often overlooking communication efficacy in driving actual behavioral changes (Rahman et al., 2022). Qualitative research examining how Malaysian publics interpret green messages and psychological or social factors impeding awareness-to-action transitions remains insufficient (Ismail & Latiff, 2019).

Additionally, urgent need exists for studies examining intersections between financial constraints and sustainable communication practice implementation in Malaysia's small and medium-sized enterprise (SME) sector (Rahman et al., 2022). Most GPR literature concentrates on large publicly-traded companies, leaving small business-specific challenges underexplored. Furthermore, literature lacks longitudinal evidence regarding GPR initiative effects on stakeholder behavioral change over time, with most current studies employing cross-sectional designs capturing single time points without accounting for dynamic stakeholder-sustainability relationship evolution (Ike et al., 2019). These gaps prove critical for advancing both GPR theory and practice.

3. METHODOLOGICAL APPROACH

This study adopts a qualitative research design investigating GPR's intricate dynamics and effects on UN SDGs within the Malaysian context. Qualitative methodology selection stems from the need to explore subjective meanings, perceptions, and motivations underpinning organizational communication and stakeholder relationships (Aziz et al., 2015). Unlike quantitative approaches prioritizing statistical generalizability, qualitative designs facilitate exploration of sustainability narratives' underlying complexities within real-world contexts. Given that GPR proves fundamentally relational, anchored in trust and ethical transparency, qualitative approaches provide depth necessary for comprehending complex interactions between Malaysian corporations and diverse publics (Aziz et al., 2015).

The primary research design involves conducting twelve semi-structured interviews with elite informants selected through purposive sampling. This method engages participants possessing extensive knowledge and strategic management experience, enabling valuable insights into Malaysia's GPR landscape (Jayaraman et al., 2023). Targeted participants include top executives and directors from sectors including banking and finance, energy and utilities, manufacturing, and non-governmental organizations involved in sustainability initiatives.

Data analysis will employ thematic analysis using NVivo software, enabling systematic identification of patterns, themes, and categories emerging from interview transcripts and sustainability reports. This approach allows researchers to uncover underlying motivations and

barriers within Malaysia's corporate sector regarding sustainable practice adoption and communication (Ibrahim et al., 2023). The integration of elite interviews with document analysis provides triangulation strengthening findings' validity and reliability.

4. PROPOSED GPR COMMUNICATION MODEL

Theoretical Framework Integration

This study's theoretical framework offers a systematic roadmap harmonizing Green Public Relations' relational and strategic dimensions within the Malaysian context. The conceptual framework organizes around a triadic structure encompassing three critical elements: Who (Stakeholder Identification), How (Strategic Engagement), and What (SDG-Aligned Content).

Stakeholder identification draws on refined Stakeholder Theory perspectives particularly applicable to emerging economies, where environmentalism interpretation often occurs through developmental progress and socio-economic stability lenses (Shah et al., 2020). In Malaysia, this process gains codification through the Malaysian Code on Corporate Governance, stipulating that boards must engage in active, transparent stakeholder communication fostering long-term value creation (Waheed & Zhang, 2022). By delineating primary and secondary stakeholders including regulatory bodies, investors, employees, local communities, and indigenous groups organizations ensure GPR initiatives transcend generic announcements to encompass targeted, contextually relevant actions.

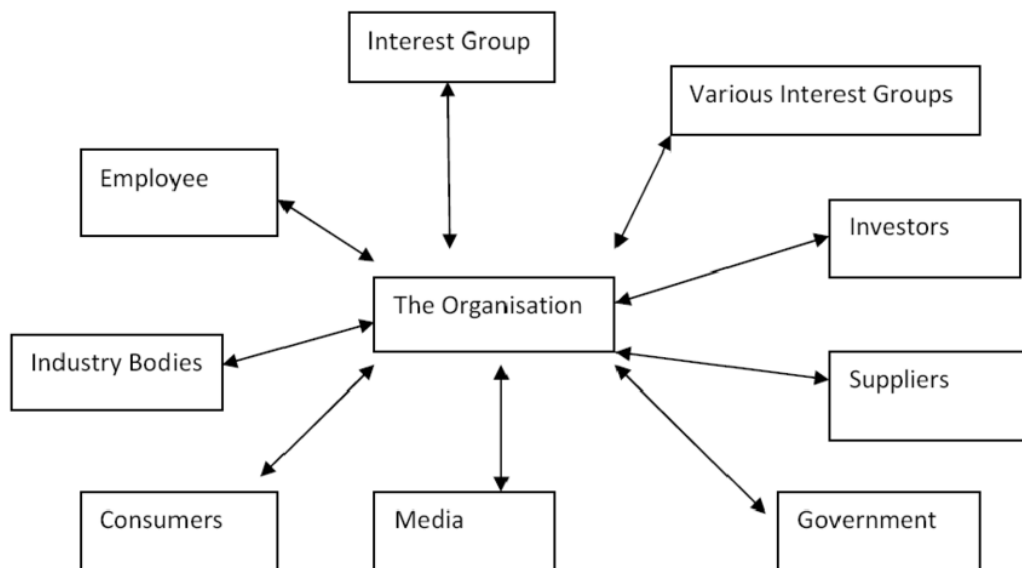


Figure 1. The Strategic Stakeholder Engagement Model for Green Public Relations.

This model illustrates the multi-directional relationships between Malaysian organizations and diverse stakeholder groups, emphasizing the centrality of organizational communication in managing sustainability expectations.

The "How" component centers on strategic engagement, advocating shifts from one-way communication flows toward two-way symmetrical information exchange. This strategic shift

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proves imperative for cultivating social capital essential for implementing complex environmental policies requiring widespread involvement and behavioral compliance (Rusli et al., 2023). In Malaysia's academic and corporate arenas, GPR strategies must align with cultural nuances shaping sustainability message perception and interpretation (Ibrahim et al., 2023).

Integration with Carroll's CSR Pyramid

Integrating GPR with Carroll's CSR Pyramid provides comprehensive sustainability approaches aligning corporate responsibilities with SDG objectives. Table 1 maps GPR messaging to Carroll's CSR Pyramid layers and corresponding UN SDGs within Malaysian contexts, illustrating how economic, legal, ethical, and philanthropic dimensions interconnect to create holistic sustainability frameworks.

Table 1: Mapping GPR Messaging to Carroll's CSR Pyramid and UN SDGs in the Malaysian Context

CSR Layer (Carroll)	GPR Communication Focus & Narrative	Primary Target UN SDGs	Localised Malaysian Indicators & Examples
Economic	Financial resilience; Green investments; Long-term shareholder value; Cost-savings through energy efficiency.	SDG 8, SDG 9, SDG 12	Inclusion in FTSE4Good Bursa Malaysia Index; Green Sukuk financing; Adoption of IR 4.0.
Legal	Disclosure integrity; Alignment with national laws; Anti-corruption in green procurement.	SDG 16, SDG 17	Compliance with Bursa Malaysia's Sustainability Reporting Guide; Environmental Quality Act 1974 adherence.
Ethical	Transparency beyond compliance; Fair labor; Cultural resonance; Integration of Islamic environmental ethics.	SDG 5, SDG 10, SDG 12	Shariah-compliant sustainability; Diversity & Inclusion (D&I) reporting; Ethical supply chain audits.
Philanthropic	Community-led conservation; Skills development; Poverty alleviation; Waste-to-wealth social enterprises.	SDG 1, SDG 11, SDG 13	Biji-Biji Initiative partnerships; Petronas "Sentuhan Kasih" programs; Local mangrove reforestation

At the Economic dimension, organizations focus on financial resilience through green investments promising long-term shareholder value, exemplified by FTSE4Good Bursa Malaysia Index inclusion, green Sukuk financing, and Industry 4.0 adoption, aligning with SDGs 8 (Decent Work

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and Economic Growth), 9 (Industry, Innovation and Infrastructure), and 12 (Responsible Consumption and Production) (Lin et al., 2025).

The Legal dimension emphasizes disclosure integrity and national law alignment, including anti-corruption measures in green procurement. Compliance with Bursa Malaysia's Sustainability Reporting Guide and Environmental Quality Act 1974 adherence prove critical for fulfilling SDGs 16 (Peace, Justice and Strong Institutions) and 17 (Partnerships for the Goals), reinforcing governance's role in corporate sustainability (Waheed & Zhang, 2022).

In the Ethical dimension, organizations pursue transparency exceeding compliance through fair labor practices and cultural resonance. Incorporating Islamic environmental ethics into business operations highlights culturally-relevant sustainability approaches, aligning with SDGs 5 (Gender Equality), 10 (Reduced Inequalities), and 12. Shariah-compliant sustainability efforts, Diversity and Inclusion reporting, and ethical supply chain audits indicate broader ethical commitments (Waheed & Zhang, 2022).

The Philanthropic dimension focuses on community engagement through conservation, skills development, and poverty alleviation initiatives. Community-driven projects exemplify social responsibility commitments aligning with SDGs 1 (No Poverty), 11 (Sustainable Cities and Communities), and 13 (Climate Action), promoting circular economies by transforming waste into wealth (Khalil et al., 2024).

Research Propositions

Building on literature synthesis and the proposed conceptual model, this study advances several theoretical propositions guiding future empirical investigations into GPR strategies' impact on SDG realization in Malaysia:

Proposition 1: Two-way symmetrical communication adoption in GPR initiatives positively correlates with heightened stakeholder trust and sustained participation in Malaysian ESG projects. This proposition underscores authentic dialogue value over performative publicity, suggesting organizations can mitigate greenwashing-related skepticism and cultivate collaborative atmospheres conducive to sustainability (Waheed & Zhang, 2022).

Proposition 2: Strategic alliances in critical environmental areas, such as carbon management and storage, prove essential for enhancing corporate GPR narrative credibility and accelerating stakeholder engagement. International cooperation examples provide both technical and reputational support for sustainability claims presented to investors and regulators (Awa et al., 2024).

Proposition 3: Incorporating ethical transparency and cultural resonance into GPR content significantly reduces awareness-behavior gaps among diverse Malaysian audiences. This assumption posits that sustainability communication achieves optimal effectiveness when ethically grounded and aligned with specific socio-cultural community values (Ibrahim et al., 2023).

Model Implementation and Feedback Mechanisms

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The proposed GPR model emphasizes SDG-congruent material curation, prioritizing global demand transformation into localized progress narratives ensuring 2030 Agenda implementation resonates with Malaysian stakeholders (Sachs, 2012). To enhance model effectiveness, integrating feedback loops via urban data analytics and observatory systems enables real-time stakeholder attitude and behavioral pattern tracking (Rusli et al., 2023). Moreover, aligning SDG principles with Corporate Social Responsibility strategies should follow structured, forward-looking planning fostering stakeholder-centric communication models (Ibrahim et al., 2023).

The model emphasizes circular economy and waste-to-wealth initiatives as components of Malaysia's national technological sustainability and resource efficiency efforts (Shah et al., 2022). This approach positions effective GPR strategies as significant contributors to SDG narrative localization, fostering greater connections between corporate objectives and societal needs while acknowledging Malaysia's multi-ethnic society requiring ethical clarity, economic viability, and active stakeholder participation assessed through sophisticated evaluative measures (Le et al., 2024).

5. DISCUSSION

This research establishes GPR as a central strategic force underpinning the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development in Malaysia. The synergistic framework integrating Stakeholder Theory with Carroll's CSR Pyramid comprehensively analyzes GPR as relational and ethical practice, demonstrating how strategic communication promotes behavioral changes facilitating SDG realization. This integrated methodology underscores the necessity of adopting systems engineering approaches to sustainability initiatives, acknowledging subjective complexities and interdependencies characterizing bioeconomic transitions (Ismail & Latiff, 2019).

In Malaysian contexts, GPR must transcend mere awareness-raising to incorporate Stages of Change models, guiding stakeholders from initial consideration toward active sustainable practice implementation (Prochaska & DiClemente, 1983). This theoretical synergy proves pivotal for addressing trust deficits associated with greenwashing, compelling organizations to reconcile ethical claims with substantive stakeholder engagement and economic realities. Furthermore, this integration facilitates rigorous GPR effect evaluation on environmental behavior, with relational public relations focus convergence with CSR's organized responsibilities equipping researchers to assess various communication strategies regarding shared value perceptions among diverse audiences (Agrawal et al., 2022).

Strategic communication use across key sectors, including sustainable tourism, emerges as vital national growth driver in Malaysia (Le et al., 2024). This theoretical framework justifies qualitative methodology applications, including semi-structured interviews with corporate leaders and qualitative content analysis, uncovering underlying motivations and barriers within Malaysia's corporate sector (Ibrahim et al., 2023). Ultimately, this paper integrates these theories proposing models where GPR serves not as ancillary but as central sustainability achievement lever.

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The proposed strategic GPR communication model proves both theoretically grounded and practically oriented toward fostering sustainable futures. By addressing Malaysia's multi-ethnic society, this paradigm necessitates combining ethical clarity, economic viability, and active stakeholder participation, all requiring assessment using sophisticated evaluative measures (Le et al., 2024). This comprehensive approach positions GPR as critical for achieving national sustainability objectives while contributing to global SDG attainment efforts.

6. CONCLUSION

This conceptual paper presents a compelling exploration of Green Public Relations' transformative potential as strategic catalyst for advancing United Nations Sustainable Development Goals within Malaysian contexts. By synthesizing Stakeholder Theory with Carroll's CSR Pyramid, this research contributes significantly to sustainability communication discourse, advocating shifts from conventional corporate reporting toward relationship-centric, ethically-driven communication frameworks.

The Malaysian-localized GPR framework directly addresses critical issues including prevalent awareness-trust deficits resulting from greenwashing perceptions. For Malaysia to achieve 2030 sustainability objectives, organizations must pivot from performative environmental claims toward fostering authentic two-way dialogues resonating with local socio-cultural and economic landscapes (Khalil et al., 2024).

Theoretical and Practical Implications

This study advances GPR scholarship by demonstrating how culturally-contextualized communication strategies enhance stakeholder trust, foster collaborative efforts, and accelerate sustainable development achievement in emerging economies. The proposed triadic framework encompassing stakeholder identification, strategic engagement, and SDG-aligned content provides practitioners with actionable guidance for developing effective, ethically grounded GPR initiatives (Waheed & Zhang, 2022).

The research propositions offer testable hypotheses for future empirical investigations, while the integration of Carroll's CSR Pyramid with Stakeholder Theory provides robust theoretical foundations for understanding GPR's multidimensional roles in sustainability contexts (Agrawal et al., 2022). Practically, the framework assists Malaysian organizations in developing culturally-relevant sustainability narratives transcending generic approaches to achieve meaningful stakeholder engagement and measurable SDG progress (Ibrahim et al., 2023).

Limitations and Future Research Directions

As a qualitative conceptual paper, findings and models derive from theoretical synthesis and select elite informant insights rather than widespread statistical validation. Additionally, the focus on high-impact industries including banking, finance, and energy may overlook significant sustainability challenges in microenterprises and informal economy sectors (Rahman et al., 2022).

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Future research should empirically validate the proposed GPR communication model using quantitative methods, with longitudinal studies proving crucial for assessing GPR strategies' enduring impacts on stakeholder behaviors (Ike et al., 2019). Furthermore, comparative analyses between Malaysia and other ASEAN nations could yield deeper insights into regional sustainability communication peculiarities. The role of emerging technologies, including Artificial Intelligence and blockchain, in enhancing GPR message transparency and traceability also remains underexplored yet vital for future inquiry (Rusli et al., 2023).

Ultimately, this study lays groundwork for more open, participatory, and impactful sustainability discussions in Malaysia, fostering collective commitments to genuine environmental stewardship and societal engagement as stakeholders collectively strive toward sustainable futures.

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