

Sustainability as a Professional Value in Public Relations: A Qualitative Analysis of Industry Discourse

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Abstract

Sustainability has gained recognition as a lodestone toward which professional communication work, including public relations (PR), should ideally aim. While sustainability is often seen in context of corporate strategy or environmental responsibility, its integration within PR practice itself remains underexplored. This study examines how sustainability is framed and embedded in contemporary public relations practice through qualitative content analysis of three widely cited industry documents: a professional association report (PRCA/PRCAI), a global PR thought leadership report (Edelman Trust Barometer), and a corporate communication sustainability report (Cisco). UNSDGs are taken as a normative reference framework to identify and interpret sustainability-related themes. The unit of analysis includes report sections and paragraphs that explicitly or implicitly refer to ethics, responsibility, transparency, stakeholder engagement, trust, or long-term communication impact. The findings indicate that sustainability is increasingly articulated as a professional value in PR practice rather than merely as an external corporate objective. While social and ethical dimensions of sustainability receive significant emphasis; environmental sustainability appears more selectively and is often addressed indirectly. The analysis further reveals that sustainability is positioned as essential to maintaining credibility, public trust, and long-term organizational legitimacy. The study contributes to sustainability communication scholarship by demonstrating how PR as a profession is redefining its role through sustainability-oriented discourse.

Keywords: Public relations practice, Sustainability communication, Professional ethics, Industry discourse, Stakeholder engagement, Trust and legitimacy, UNSDGs

1. Introduction

Sustainability has become a defining concern across organisational governance, communication, and public engagement. Within public relations (PR) scholarship, sustainability has been predominantly examined through the lenses of corporate social responsibility (CSR), environmental communication, and sustainability reporting (Ihlen, Bartlett, & May, 2011; Morsing & Schultz, 2006). While this literature has advanced understanding of how organisations communicate sustainability-related initiatives, it largely conceptualises sustainability as an *external organisational objective* rather than as a principle embedded within public relations practice itself.

This instrumental framing overlooks the normative role of public relations as a profession responsible for mediating relationships between organisations, publics, and society (Grunig & Grunig, 2006; Edwards, 2018). Contemporary challenges—declining institutional trust, stakeholder scepticism, misinformation, and heightened expectations of transparency—have intensified scrutiny of PR’s ethical foundations and societal legitimacy (Edelman, 2025; OECD, 2022). In this context, sustainability may be understood not merely as an issue to be communicated, but as a professional value system shaping how public relations defines credibility, accountability, and long-term relevance.

According to Grunig (2009) and Ledingham (2003), normative and relationship-oriented PR theories say that ethical communication, dialogue, and mutual understanding are key to good practice. These principles are very similar to sustainability frameworks that put a lot of emphasis on being open, responsible, and looking to the future (United Nations, 2015) Yet, limited empirical attention has been dedicated to how sustainability is expressed within professional PR language itself, notably in industry texts that create norms, expectations, and standards of behaviour.

Industry and professional reports represent an important but underutilised source for examining this dimension. According to Pieczka (2015) and Gregory & Willis (2013), these documents serve as normative texts that express professional priorities, validate practices, and indicate how the field perceives its changing role. It is possible to determine whether sustainability is positioned as a supporting communication theme or as a crucial aspect of professional identity by analysing these texts.

Considering this, the current study looks at how sustainability is framed and conceptualized in a few corporate and public relations industry reports. Using qualitative content analysis and drawing on cross-cutting United Nations sustainability principles and normative public relations theory, the study investigates dominant sustainability dimensions in professional discourse and their implications for PR professionalism, trust, and legitimacy.

Following are the research questions that align with the objectives of the study:

- RQ1: How is sustainability conceptualised and framed within selected public relations industry and corporate reports?
- RQ2: Which dimensions of sustainability—ethical communication, transparency and trust, stakeholder engagement, social responsibility, environmental awareness, and professional accountability—are most salient in contemporary public relations discourse?
- RQ3: How these sustainability framings align with cross-cutting United Nations sustainability principles and normative public relations theory?

By shifting attention from sustainability communication outcomes to sustainability as a professional value system, this study contributes to public relations scholarship by theorising how PR practice itself is being re-oriented in response to evolving societal expectations.

2. Conceptual Background: Sustainability, Public Relations, and Professional Practice

2.1 Sustainability and Public Relations: Dominant Approaches and Limitations

Environmental advocacy, CSR communication, and sustainability reporting techniques have been the main topics of research on sustainability and public relations (Ihlen et al., 2011; Morsing & Schultz, 2006). These studies offer significant insights into the effectiveness of organizational communication by examining message framing, stakeholder engagement tactics, and reputational outcomes. However, they tend to position sustainability as a *topic of communication* rather than as a principle guiding communicative conduct.

This focus risks marginalising the normative dimension of public relations practice. By treating sustainability as an external organisational agenda, existing research underplays how sustainability principles may shape professional values such as ethics, transparency, accountability, and relational responsibility. Addressing this limitation requires repositioning sustainability as a professional logic embedded within PR practice.

2.2 Normative and Relationship-Oriented Public Relations Theory

Normative public relations theory provides a foundational framework for conceptualising sustainability as a professional value. Excellence Theory and the two-way symmetrical model emphasise ethical communication, dialogue, and long-term relationship building as hallmarks of effective and responsible PR practice (Grunig & Grunig, 2006; Grunig, 2009). Relationship management theory further positions trust, commitment, satisfaction, and mutual understanding as core outcomes of professional communication (Ledingham, 2003).

These theoretical perspectives conceptualise public relations as a socially responsible function with obligations that extend beyond organisational self-interest (Heath, 2013). Thus, normative PR theory is conceptually consistent with sustainability principles, especially inclusiveness, accountability, and long-term orientation. By using this lens to examine sustainability, one can comprehend how PR practices contribute to institutional legitimacy and societal trust.

2.3 Sustainability as a Normative Logic and Professional Value

According to recent research, trust-building, sustainability governance, and professional communication ethics are increasingly overlapping (Edwards, 2018; Gregory & Willis, 2013). Sustainability is becoming more widely recognized as a benchmark for ethical professional behaviour rather than being limited to the environmental or corporate social responsibility fields. This shift suggests that sustainability functions as a normative professional logic, shaping how PR practitioners define credibility, legitimacy, and accountability. Such a logic reframes sustainability from an instrumental reputation-management tool to an embedded value influencing decision-making, professional identity, and ethical judgement. Understanding this shift requires attention to professional discourse rather than solely to organisational campaigns or stakeholder responses.

2.4 Industry Reports as Normative Professional Texts

Professional and corporate reports operate as normative texts that articulate expectations, standards, and values within a profession (Piecicka, 2015). They reflect collective understandings of professional challenges, priorities, and responsibilities, thereby shaping how PR legitimises itself in relation to society.

Using industry reports as data aligns with interpretive and critical traditions in communication research that view professional discourse as constitutive of practice (Edwards, 2018). Analysing such documents enables identification of emerging patterns in how sustainability is framed as part of PR's professional self-definition, particularly in relation to trust, transparency, and accountability.

2.5 Positioning the Present Study

The current study examines how sustainability is framed in modern professional discourse by analyzing a few PR industry and corporate reports, building on normative PR theory and sustainability governance frameworks. The study aims to determine whether sustainability is positioned as a side issue or as an ingrained professional value influencing public relations practice by comparing these framings to the overarching UN sustainability principles.

The methodological strategy and analytical framework used in the study are informed by this conceptual foundation.

Methodology

Research Design

This study adopts a qualitative content analysis research design to examine how sustainability is framed and embedded within contemporary public relations (PR) practice. Qualitative content analysis is appropriate for

analysing professional and institutional texts, as it enables systematic interpretation of meanings, values, and normative orientations reflected in industry discourse.

The study treats professional PR reports as normative texts that articulate professional values, expectations, and evolving standards of practice, rather than as neutral informational documents.

Data Selection and Corpus

The dataset consists of three widely cited and influential professional documents representing different yet complementary dimensions of public relations practice:

1. A professional association report (PRCAI / SPRINT), representing industry guidance and professional self-regulation;
2. A global PR thought leadership report (Edelman Trust Barometer), representing trust-focused professional discourse; and
3. A corporate communication sustainability report (Cisco Purpose Report), representing organisational enactment of sustainability communication.

These reports were selected purposively to capture professional, institutional, and corporate perspectives on sustainability in PR practice.

Unit of Analysis

The unit of analysis comprised paragraphs or report sections that explicitly or implicitly referred to:

- ethics,
- sustainability,
- responsibility,
- transparency,
- stakeholder engagement,
- trust, or
- long-term communication impact.

Both explicit references (e.g., “ethics,” “sustainability,” “trust”) and implicit framings (e.g., responsibility, legitimacy, accountability) were included.

Coding Approach

The study employed a hybrid coding approach, combining deductive and light inductive strategies.

Deductive Coding Framework

The primary coding framework was developed deductively through conceptual triangulation of three sources:

1. Cross-cutting sustainability principles derived from the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), such as accountability, transparency, inclusiveness, social responsibility, and environmental responsibility;

2. Normative and relationship-oriented public relations theories, including Excellence Theory, two-way symmetrical communication, relationship management, and normative PR theory; and
3. Professional PR discourse and guidelines, as reflected in industry reports and professional codes of conduct (e.g., PRCA, ICCO).

Rather than operationalising individual SDGs or multiple PR models, the study identified overlapping normative principles across these sources and translated them into analytically distinct coding categories.

Final Coding Categories

Six coding categories were used:

- Ethical Communication
- Transparency and Trust
- Stakeholder Engagement
- Social Responsibility
- Environmental Awareness
- Professional Accountability

These categories represent key dimensions through which sustainability is embedded within PR practice.

Coding Procedure

A codebook was developed defining each category, its conceptual meaning, inclusion criteria, and indicative textual markers. The selected reports were then read closely, and relevant text segments were manually coded based on conceptual alignment rather than frequency counts. Text segments could be assigned to multiple categories where appropriate, reflecting the interrelated nature of sustainability dimensions.

Manual coding was adopted to allow for contextual interpretation and reflexive engagement with the texts. Basic qualitative data analysis software (e.g., NVivo) may support this process but was not essential to the analytical logic.

Analytical Strategy

Following coding, the analysis focused on:

- identifying dominant and marginal sustainability dimensions across reports;
- comparing how different report types (professional association vs corporate) articulate sustainability;
- examining whether sustainability is treated as an external organisational objective or as an intrinsic professional value.

The findings were then interpreted in relation to UN sustainability principles and normative public relations theory to assess the broader implications for PR professionalism and legitimacy.

4. Analysis / Findings

4.1 Analytical Strategy

The analysis follows a theory-informed qualitative content analysis in which professional and corporate reports are treated as normative texts articulating the evolving values, priorities, and self-understandings of contemporary public relations practice. Rather than relying on frequency counts alone, the analysis focuses on the salience of sustainability themes, the ways in which sustainability is framed (instrumental versus professional value), and the articulation of responsibility within professional discourse.

Six deductively derived codes—Ethical Communication, Transparency and Trust, Stakeholder Engagement, Social Responsibility, Environmental Awareness, and Professional Accountability—were applied across all reports as analytical lenses rather than descriptive categories.

4.2 Ethical Communication as a Foundational Professional Value

Across all reports, ethical communication emerges as a foundational and legitimising principle of public relations practice. The PRCAl and SPRINT reports explicitly position ethical communication as central to India's global reputation and nation-branding efforts, framing public relations as a nation-building and credibility-enhancing function rather than a promotional activity. The SPRINT report further reinforces ethics through its emphasis on purpose-driven communication while cautioning against performative ethics and greenwashing.

The Cisco report institutionalises ethics through ESG materiality assessments and alignment with recognised global frameworks, indicating that ethical commitments are structurally embedded rather than rhetorically asserted.

Finding: Ethical communication is framed as a strategic necessity for credibility, legitimacy, and long-term trust rather than as moral idealism.

4.3 Transparency and Trust as Sustainability Mechanisms

Transparency and trust are consistently articulated as mechanisms through which sustainability is operationalised in public relations practice. PRCAl findings link transparency directly to reputational outcomes and global perception management, while Cisco's disclosure practices demonstrate transparency as a process involving verification, accountability, and stakeholder collaboration rather than mere information sharing.

Finding: Transparency is positioned as a precondition for trust, reinforcing sustainability as a relational and procedural commitment.

4.4 Stakeholder Engagement and the Shift to Dialogic Practice

Reports frame stakeholder engagement as dialogic, inclusive, and ecosystem-focused. While the PRCAl emphasizes engagement beyond elite corporate actors to include SMEs and broader social stakeholders, the SPRINT report places more emphasis on advocacy-driven communication that aims for collective participation. Instead of viewing partners, communities, and employees as passive audiences, Cisco presents them as co-creators of impact.

Finding: Instead of tactical outreach, stakeholder engagement is portrayed as structural participation, suggesting sustainability as a relational commitment ingrained in professional practice.

4.5 The Most Important Sustainability Aspect Is Social Responsibility

The most thorough and consistent articulation of social responsibility is found in all reports. Public health, infrastructure, climate resilience, and inclusive growth are highlighted by PRCAl as communication priorities in

line with national development. While Cisco views workforce diversity, digital inclusion, and social impact as essential components of organizational identity, the SPRINT report links purpose-driven PR to social sectors.

Finding: A people-centric approach is reflected in the way sustainability in PR practice is primarily framed through social and ethical responsibility.

4.6 Environmental Awareness: Selective and Context-Dependent

Environmental sustainability is there but patchily expressed. PRC AI elevates the environment to reputational and national image challenges, whereas environmental topics are embedded within overarching ESG and purpose narratives, with some red flags over fears of greenwashing in the SPRINT report. Cisco is a more promising exception, with explicit environmental goals incorporated into the firm’s governance.

Finding: Environmental sustainability remains secondary to social and ethical dimensions unless driven by strong corporate governance mechanisms.

4.7 Professional Accountability and the Re-definition of PR

Professional accountability emerges as a meta-theme linking all sustainability dimensions. PRC AI and SPRINT emphasise professional standards, ethical capability, and resistance to misinformation, while Cisco’s alignment with ESG benchmarks institutionalises accountability.

Finding: Public relations is framed as a profession with societal obligations rather than a discretionary communication service.

Table 1 summarises the deductive coding framework that guided the qualitative analysis across all reports.

Table 1. Deductive Coding Framework for Analysing Sustainability in Public Relations Discourse

Core Code	Theoretical / Conceptual Basis	Analytical Focus Across Reports
Ethical Communication	Normative public relations theory; professional ethics	Integrity, avoidance of greenwashing, misinformation control, ethical advisory role
Transparency & Trust	OECD Trust Framework; Excellence Theory	Disclosure practices, credibility building, accountability mechanisms, verification
Stakeholder Engagement	Two-way symmetrical model; relationship management theory	Dialogue, inclusiveness, ecosystem participation, co-creation of meaning
Social Responsibility	UN sustainability principles; public interest communication	Health, inclusion, development, social impact, societal value creation
Environmental Awareness	ESG discourse; sustainability communication	Climate narratives, environmental risk framing, governance-driven ecological commitments
Professional Accountability	Professionalisation theory; ICCO global PR discourse	Standards, governance, ethical capability, role responsibility

Table 1. Deductive coding framework used for qualitative analysis of sustainability in public relations professional discourse. The codes were applied across all reports as analytical lenses rather than frequency-based categories, enabling interpretation of how sustainability is framed as a professional value system

5. Discussion

This study examined how sustainability is conceptualised within contemporary public relations professional discourse through the analysis of industry and corporate reports. Addressing RQ1–RQ3, the findings demonstrate a clear shift from sustainability as a peripheral CSR or environmental concern to sustainability as a professional logic shaping ethical conduct, transparency, stakeholder engagement, and accountability.

5.1 Sustainability as a Normative Professional Logic

Across all analysed texts, sustainability is embedded within the normative foundations of public relations practice rather than framed as an issue-specific agenda. Ethical communication, long-term relationship building, and responsible decision-making are consistently positioned as defining features of professional competence. This supports the interpretation of sustainability as a professional logic that guides how PR defines legitimacy and credibility.

5.2 Trust as the Integrative Construct

A central contribution of the study is the identification of trust as the integrative construct linking sustainability practices and professional legitimacy. Ethical communication, transparency, inclusiveness, and accountability converge toward trust as both a process and an outcome. This positions sustainability not as symbolic messaging but as sustained, credibility-building professional behaviour.

5.3 Dialogic Stakeholder Engagement and Relational Sustainability

The findings indicate a clear shift from transactional communication toward dialogic and ecosystem-oriented stakeholder engagement. Sustainability is framed as collective participation and shared responsibility, reinforcing relational and democratic dimensions of public relations practice.

5.4 Uneven Centrality of Environmental Sustainability

While environmental awareness is present, it remains less central than social and ethical responsibility. Environmental sustainability is more robustly institutionalised in corporate governance contexts than in professional PR discourse, revealing a tension between reputational priorities and ecological advocacy.

5.5 Situating Findings within Global Professional and Governance Frameworks

Insights from the ICCO World PR Report and the OECD Trust Framework reinforce the study's findings by demonstrating global convergence around ethics, transparency, accountability, and trust as defining professional standards. These frameworks situate sustainability-oriented PR practice within broader governance and trust-building expectations, elevating public relations from organisational communication to a legitimacy-seeking societal function.

Theoretical Contribution

Building on the findings discussed in the previous section, this study advances three interrelated theoretical contribution to public relations and sustainability communication scholarship.

First, it reconceptualises sustainability as a professional logic within public relations rather than a thematic domain.

Existing literature often treats sustainability as an issue area (e.g., environmental communication, CSR messaging,

or ESG disclosure). By contrast, this study demonstrates that sustainability is increasingly embedded in the *normative foundations* of public relations practice—shaping ethical reasoning, professional accountability, stakeholder engagement, and legitimacy management. This reframing advances normative and excellence-based theories by positioning sustainability as integral to how public relations defines professional credibility and societal relevance.

Second, the study theorises trust as the integrative mechanism linking sustainability and public relations practice.

Drawing on the OECD Trust Framework and professional PR discourse, the findings show that sustainability-related practices—ethical communication, transparency, inclusiveness, and responsibility—converge on trust as both a process and an outcome. This extends relationship management and excellence theories by conceptualising trust not merely as a relational variable but as a governance-aligned construct through which public relations contributes to institutional legitimacy in complex social systems.

Third, the study advances a governance-oriented understanding of public relations professionalism.

By aligning PR sustainability discourse with global professional (ICCO) and institutional (OECD) frameworks, the analysis positions public relations as a governance-relevant profession with societal obligations. This challenges instrumental and promotional critiques of public relations and supports its theorisation as a democratic, accountability-driven communication function that operates at the intersection of organisations, stakeholders, and public interest.

Collectively, these contributions extend public relations theory beyond issue-based sustainability communication toward a **normative, trust-centred, and governance-oriented model of professional practice**, offering a conceptual bridge between sustainability studies, trust scholarship, and contemporary public relations theory.

Limitations and Future Research

This study has several limitations that also suggest directions for future research. First, the analysis is based on a purposive selection of professional and corporate reports, which reflect **normative and aspirational discourse** rather than everyday public relations practice. While appropriate for examining professional values, these texts may not fully capture how sustainability is operationalised in practice. Future research could extend this approach to campaign materials, organisational guidelines, or practitioner interviews to examine enactment alongside discourse.

Second, the qualitative content analysis prioritises **interpretive depth over generalisability**. The findings are therefore theory-building rather than representative. Mixed-method studies combining qualitative analysis with surveys or interviews could assess how sustainability framings are understood and prioritised across professional contexts.

Third, the deductively informed coding framework, grounded in sustainability principles and normative PR theory, may privilege established dimensions such as ethics, trust, and social responsibility. Future studies could adopt more inductive or comparative approaches to explore alternative or context-specific interpretations of sustainability.

Finally, the relatively limited emphasis on environmental sustainability may reflect the nature of professional PR discourse. Focused studies on environmental and climate communication within PR practice could further enrich sustainability scholarship.

Conclusion

This study examined how sustainability is conceptualised and embedded within contemporary public relations practice through a qualitative analysis of influential industry, corporate, and professional reports. Answering the three research questions, results show that sustainability and public relations is not based on an environmental or

CSR add-on, but a professional logic: ethics in communication, transparency, trust-building, engagement of stakeholders. social responsibility and accountability.

Across the examined documents, sustainability is found to be a relational and normative concept that defines professional credibility and institutional acceptability. Good communication and transparency, as well articulated as integrated stakeholder engagement that is dialogic, inclusive, ecosystem focused. (2015), social responsibility and not sustainability dominates the debate on this topic, which reveals a preference for a human-centred approach in conformity with public interest, development and inclusion agendas. Environmental sustainability is, however implicitly present but selectively articulated and its more systematically institutionalized in corporate governance – rather than in professional PR discourse.

The study advances theoretical understanding of sustainability as an organising principle of PR professionalism by locating such findings against UN sustainability principles, normative PR theory and global governance and professional framings. The analysis suggests a convergence of professional self-regulation, corporate accountability and global trust discourses – which together serve to confirm the growing importance of public relations as a socially responsible and legitimacy-seeking occupation.

Overall, by showing that sustainability serves more as a structural and ethical basis influencing modern PR practice, legitimacy, and long-term societal relevance than as a campaign theme, the study advances sustainability scholarship in public relations.

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