

# Utilising Public Relations to Combat Misinformation and Promote Evidence-Based Policies for Sustainable Development

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## **Abstract**

Public relations (PR) plays a crucial role in shaping public opinion and influencing decision-making processes, especially in the context of sustainable development. Accurate information is vital for achieving sustainable development goals, but the prevalence of misinformation poses significant challenges. Misinformation undermines public trust, instills skepticism, and hampers the implementation of evidence-based policies. To address this issue, strategic PR initiatives are paramount in disseminating accurate information and countering false narratives. However, there is a knowledge gap regarding the most effective PR strategies and methodologies to combat misinformation and promote evidence-based policies for sustainable development. This study aimed to bridge that gap by investigating the utilisation of PR techniques in achieving these goals. The objectives were to identify challenges and misconceptions surrounding sustainable development, explore effective PR strategies, and assess their impact on public attitudes and behaviours. In this study, a mixed-methods research design was employed, combining qualitative and quantitative approaches. The population included public relations professionals, policymakers, stakeholders involved in sustainable development, and the general public. The sample size for the qualitative component (interviews) aimed to achieve data saturation, typically involving 15 participants. For the quantitative component (surveys), a representative sample size of 110 participants from the general public was targeted. Purposive sampling was used for qualitative interviews, while a combination of convenience sampling and stratified random sampling was used for surveys. The study concluded that utilising PR techniques is essential in combating misinformation and promoting evidence-based policies for sustainable development. By leveraging effective communication strategies and collaborations, PR professionals can dispel misinformation, foster public trust, and facilitate the implementation of sustainable development policies. Recommendations encompass enhancing media literacy and critical thinking skills, fostering collaboration between PR professionals,

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scientific experts, and policymakers, tailoring communication strategies for different platforms, monitoring of PR initiatives, and fostering partnerships with diverse stakeholders.

**Keywords:** *Public Relations, Misinformation, Evidence-Based Policies, Sustainable Development, Communication Strategies.*

### **Introduction**

Public relations (PR) plays a crucial role in shaping public opinion and influencing decision-making processes. In the context of sustainable development, it becomes even more essential to utilize effective PR strategies to combat misinformation and promote evidence-based policies. Sustainable development encompasses various interconnected pillars, including economic growth, environmental protection, and social equity. Achieving sustainable development goals requires the active participation and support of the public and private sectors, as well as the general public, Cho and Gower (2020).

Accurate information holds critical importance for sustainable development, encompassing economic growth, social inclusion, and environmental protection (United Nations, 2015). Reliable data empowers policy-makers, businesses, and communities to make informed decisions and implement effective strategies to tackle pressing issues such as poverty, climate change, and inequality (World Bank, 2019). Without a strong foundation of accurate information, achieving sustainable development goals becomes increasingly challenging (Sachs, Schmidt-Traub, Kroll, Lafortune, & Fuller, 2019).

Misinformation and the dissemination of false narratives present formidable obstacles to the achievement of sustainable development (Vosoughi, Roy, & Aral, 2018). This pervasive issue has far-reaching implications, including the potential to instill confusion, skepticism, and reluctance among the public to support evidence-based policies (Pennycook & Rand, 2019). Furthermore, it erodes trust in essential institutions, including governmental bodies, non-governmental organizations, and scientific experts (Lewandowsky, Ecker, & Cook, 2020). Consequently, addressing misinformation through strategic public relations (PR) initiatives becomes paramount, as it enables the cultivation of an informed public and facilitates the effective implementation of sustainable development policies.

The threat posed by misinformation to sustainable development efforts is substantial (Vosoughi, Roy, & Aral, 2018). In our contemporary digital age, the rapid dissemination of false narratives and misleading content through social media platforms has significant consequences. These include the shaping of public opinion and the exertion of influence over policy decisions (Lewandowsky et al., 2020). The ramifications of misinformation extend beyond mere skepticism, as they contribute to increased polarization and a general sense of distrust within society (Pennycook & Rand, 2019). Within the realm of sustainable development, misinformation undermines endeavours aimed at addressing environmental challenges, impedes social progress, and hampers economic advancement (UNESCO, 2019). Thus, countering misinformation assumes crucial importance in ensuring the prevalence of evidence-based policies.

Research has shown the power of PR in influencing public perceptions and behaviours. A study conducted by Cho and Gower (2020) examined the role of strategic communication in promoting sustainable development initiatives. The study emphasized the importance of using PR techniques to effectively communicate complex scientific concepts and data to the public in a clear and accessible manner. By utilising evidence-

based messaging, PR practitioners can counter misinformation and help shape public opinion in favour of sustainable development policies.

Furthermore, the study by Cho and Gower (2020) highlighted the significance of collaboration between PR professionals and scientific experts. By working together, PR practitioners can access accurate and up-to-date information, ensuring that their messaging is based on sound scientific evidence. This collaboration can also help bridge the gap between scientists and the general public, fostering trust and understanding.

Despite the recognized importance of PR in combating misinformation and promoting evidence-based policies for sustainable development, there is a knowledge gap regarding the most effective strategies and methodologies to achieve these goals. The existing research provides valuable insights, but further exploration is needed to understand the specific approaches that yield the best outcomes.

To bridge this knowledge gap, the study aimed to investigate the utilisation of PR techniques to combat misinformation and promote evidence-based policies for sustainable development. The objectives of the study were threefold: (1) to identify the key challenges and misconceptions surrounding sustainable development issues, (2) to explore the most effective PR strategies for addressing misinformation and promoting evidence-based policies, and (3) to assess the impact of PR initiatives on public attitudes and behaviours towards sustainable development.

The study employed a mixed-methods approach to gather comprehensive data. A systematic review of literature and case studies was conducted to identify challenges, misconceptions, and PR strategies related to sustainable development. The qualitative research method (interviews), provided deeper insights from PR professionals, experts, and the public. Quantitative surveys were administered to assess the impact of PR initiatives on public attitudes and behaviours.

To combat the detrimental effects of misinformation, strategic PR initiatives must be employed. These initiatives serve as essential tools in disseminating accurate information and countering false narratives. By leveraging effective communication strategies, public relations professionals can help dispel misinformation, foster public trust, and promote evidence-based policies that advance sustainable development. Through the implementation of successful campaigns and initiatives, insights can be gleaned into best practices that mitigate the spread and impact of misinformation on sustainable development efforts (Wright & Hinson, 2020).

However, the prevalence of misinformation poses significant challenges to sustainable development, as false narratives and misleading content disseminated through social media platforms shape public opinion, influence policy decisions, and undermine progress (Lewandowsky, et al., 2020). The consequences of misinformation are far-reaching, including increased skepticism, polarization, and societal distrust (Pennycook & Rand, 2019). Within the context of sustainable development, misinformation hampers efforts to address environmental challenges, impede social progress, and hinder economic advancement (UNESCO, 2019). Therefore, countering misinformation assumes critical importance to ensure the prevalence of evidence-based policies.

In this regard, strategic public relations (PR) initiatives play a vital role in combating misinformation and promoting accurate information that supports sustainable development goals (Wright & Hinson, 2020). By leveraging effective communication strategies, PR can contribute to dispelling misinformation, fostering public trust, and

facilitating the successful implementation of evidence-based policies for sustainable development.

Against this backdrop, this study aims to explore the role of public relations in countering misinformation and promoting evidence-based policies for sustainable development. By investigating the challenges and misconceptions surrounding sustainable development issues, identifying effective PR strategies, and assessing their impact on public attitudes and behaviours, this research seeks to contribute to the existing knowledge base and provide actionable insights for practitioners and policymakers in their efforts to achieve sustainable development objectives.

## **Literature and Conceptual Review**

### **The Role of Public Relations in Countering Misinformation**

Public relations (PR) is defined as the strategic communication process aimed at building mutually beneficial relationships between an organization or individual and its target audience, including the public, media, stakeholders, and society at large (Cutlip, Center, & Broom, 2016). PR professionals utilize various communication tools and techniques to manage the spread of information, shape public perceptions, and influence attitudes and behaviours.

The significance of public relations lies in its ability to bridge the gap between organizations or individuals and their target audience. PR helps establish trust, credibility, and goodwill through transparent and effective communication (Wilcox, Cameron, Reber, & Shin, 2019). It plays a critical role in shaping public opinion, managing crises, and fostering mutually beneficial relationships between organizations and stakeholders.

Strategic communication is a key component of public relations and plays a crucial role in combating misinformation. Strategic communication involves the deliberate planning and execution of communication activities to achieve specific objectives (Freberg, 2020). In the context of combating misinformation, strategic communication focuses on effectively disseminating accurate information and countering false narratives.

Strategic communication enables PR professionals to identify misinformation, analyse its sources, and develop targeted messaging to address and correct false information (DiStaso & Bortree, 2017). By utilising evidence-based messaging, PR practitioners can provide accurate and reliable information to the public, debunk myths, and promote a better understanding of complex issues.

Strategic communication also involves selecting appropriate communication channels to reach the target audience effectively. PR professionals leverage traditional media outlets, digital platforms, social media, and other channels to ensure that accurate information reaches a wide audience and competes with misinformation (Seltzer & Mitrook, 2017).

Public relations has immense potential in promoting evidence-based policies. Evidence-based policies are those that are informed by rigorous research, data, and scientific evidence (Lavis et al., 2019). PR professionals can play a crucial role in communicating the benefits and rationale behind evidence-based policies, fostering public understanding, and garnering support.

PR practitioners can collaborate with scientific experts to access accurate and up-to-date information. This collaboration ensures that PR messaging is grounded in sound scientific evidence, increasing the credibility and trustworthiness of the communication (Sullivan, 2018). By effectively communicating complex scientific concepts to the public in a clear and accessible manner, PR professionals can bridge the gap between scientific knowledge and public understanding.

Public relations can also engage in proactive media relations, establishing relationships with journalists and offering expert perspectives to ensure accurate reporting of evidence-based policies (Heath, 2016). PR initiatives can utilize media interviews, press releases, and media briefings to provide accurate information to journalists, enabling them to report on policies in an informed and factual manner.

Additionally, public relations can leverage social media campaigns, influencer partnerships, and community engagement initiatives to promote evidence-based policies. By utilising interactive platforms, PR professionals can engage with the public, address concerns, provide clarifications, and build trust in the scientific evidence underlying these policies (Waters & Tindall, 2018).

However, public relations plays a significant role in countering misinformation through strategic communication. Through accurate messaging, selection of appropriate communication channels, and collaboration with scientific experts, PR practitioners can combat misinformation effectively. Furthermore, public relations has the potential to promote evidence-based policies by fostering public understanding and support through credible and transparent communication.

### **Impact of Misinformation on Sustainable Development**

One prominent case study illustrating the impact of misinformation on sustainable development is the controversy surrounding climate change. Skepticism and misinformation regarding climate change have hindered efforts to mitigate its effects and implement sustainable practices. For example, the dissemination of false information about the causes and severity of climate change has led to public confusion and a lack of support for evidence-based policies Cook, Nuccitelli, Green, Richardson, Winkler, Painting, Way, Jacobs, and Skuce (2016). This misinformation has delayed action on reducing greenhouse gas emissions and transitioning to renewable energy sources, impeding progress toward sustainable development goals related to environmental protection.

Another case study is the misinformation surrounding genetically modified organisms (GMOs). Misconceptions and false narratives about the safety and benefits of GMOs have impacted agricultural practices and sustainability efforts. Public concerns fuelled by misinformation have hindered the adoption of genetically modified crops that could contribute to increased food production and reduced environmental impact (McFadden, Huffman, Rousu, & Shogren, 2018). This misinformation affects sustainable development by limiting the potential of innovative agricultural technologies to address food security and environmental sustainability challenges.

The impact of misinformation on sustainable development efforts is exacerbated by several vulnerabilities and challenges. One vulnerability is the spread of misinformation through social media platforms and digital communication channels. These platforms provide a rapid and wide-reaching dissemination of information, making it challenging to verify the accuracy and credibility of the content (Vosoughi, Roy, & Aral, 2018).

Additionally, the echo chamber effect, where individuals are exposed to information that aligns with their pre-existing beliefs, reinforces misinformation and hampers efforts to correct false narratives (Del Vicario, Bessi, Zollo, Petroni, Scala, Caldarelli, Stanley, & Quattrociocchi, 2016).

Another challenge is the erosion of trust in scientific expertise and institutions. Misinformation campaigns often aim to undermine the credibility of scientific evidence, creating doubt and skepticism among the public. This erosion of trust makes it difficult to communicate evidence-based policies effectively and garner public support for sustainable development initiatives (Lewandowsky et al., 2017). The public's reliance on alternative sources of information and the rejection of scientific consensus can hinder progress toward sustainable development goals.

The implications of misinformation on sustainable development efforts are significant. Firstly, misinformation can impede the adoption of evidence-based policies, leading to delayed or ineffective actions. Public skepticism and misinformation campaigns may influence policymakers to prioritize short-term interests over long-term sustainable solutions, hindering progress toward environmental protection, social equity, and economic growth (Zivkovic, 2021).

Misinformation also undermines public engagement and participation in sustainable development initiatives. When individuals are misinformed, they may be less likely to actively contribute to sustainable practices, support environmentally friendly policies, or make informed choices regarding consumption and waste management (Jacquet, Dietrich, & Van Leeuwen, 2015). This lack of engagement and participation can hinder the implementation of sustainable development measures at both individual and collective levels.

Moreover, misinformation can exacerbate inequalities and social divisions. Vulnerable populations may be disproportionately affected by the consequences of misinformation, such as environmental degradation or the spread of false health-related information. These disparities hinder the achievement of social equity, one of the pillars of sustainable development (Foster, Chawla, & Stuart, 2019).

Addressing the impact of misinformation on sustainable development requires concerted efforts from various stakeholders, including PR practitioners, policymakers, educators, and the media. By implementing effective communication strategies, promoting media literacy, and enhancing scientific literacy among the public, it is possible to mitigate the negative consequences of misinformation and promote evidence-based policies for sustainable development.

### **Effective Communication Strategies to Combat Misinformation:**

Successful public relations campaigns provide valuable lessons that can be applied to combat misinformation. For example, the "Truth" campaign, initiated by the American Legacy Foundation, effectively tackled misinformation about the dangers of tobacco use (Farrelly, Davis, Haviland, Messeri, & Heaton, 2017). This campaign employed a combination of mass media messages, strategic partnerships, and grassroots initiatives to raise awareness about the harmful effects of smoking and counter tobacco industry misinformation. The campaign's success demonstrated the power of consistent messaging, targeted outreach, and collaboration with credible partners.

When addressing misinformation in sustainable development, several best practices can be employed. Firstly, it is essential to provide accurate and accessible information to

the public. Communicating complex scientific concepts clearly and concisely, using plain language, visual aids, and relatable examples, can enhance understanding and counter misinformation (Cho & Gower, 2020).

Secondly, transparency and openness are crucial. Sharing the sources and methodologies behind evidence-based policies can foster trust and credibility. Engaging in two-way communication by actively listening to public concerns, addressing questions, and acknowledging uncertainties can build trust and credibility in the information provided (Cho & Gower, 2020).

Additionally, tailoring messages to specific target audiences is essential. Understanding the values, beliefs, and concerns of different demographic groups allows for the development of tailored messages that resonate with their specific needs and interests (Cho & Gower, 2020). Employing storytelling techniques, personal anecdotes, and testimonials can also enhance message effectiveness and engagement (Farrelly et al., 2017).

To combat misinformation effectively, leveraging credible sources and partnerships is crucial. Scientific experts, academic institutions, and reputable organizations can serve as trusted sources of information (Cho & Gower, 2020). Collaborating with these stakeholders not only enhances the credibility of the messaging but also enables access to accurate and up-to-date scientific knowledge. By engaging in partnerships, PR practitioners can tap into the expertise and resources of scientific communities, bridging the gap between scientific knowledge and public understanding.

Furthermore, collaborating with NGOs, industry leaders, and influential figures can help amplify the reach and impact of communication efforts. Partnering with organizations and individuals that share the same goals and values can enhance credibility and provide a wider platform for disseminating accurate information (Cho & Gower, 2020).

By leveraging credible sources and partnerships, PR practitioners can tap into existing networks, enhance their expertise, and ensure the accuracy and trustworthiness of the information communicated to the public.

Thus, effective communication strategies to combat misinformation in sustainable development involve learning from successful public relations campaigns, employing best practices such as providing accurate and accessible information, tailoring messages, and engaging in two-way communication. Leveraging credible sources and partnerships, including scientific experts and reputable organizations, enhances the credibility and reach of communication efforts. These strategies are essential for countering misinformation and promoting evidence-based policies in sustainable development.

### **Case Studies: Public Relations Initiatives for Sustainable Development**

Several empirical studies and case studies have demonstrated the effectiveness of public relations campaigns in promoting sustainable development and combating misinformation. One notable example is the "Cool Australia" campaign, which aimed to educate the Australian public about climate change and sustainable living practices. The campaign utilized a multi-channel approach, including online resources, teacher training programs, and community engagement initiatives (Ellis & Collinson, 2017). The study found that the campaign successfully increased awareness and knowledge about climate change among the target audience, leading to positive changes in attitudes and behaviours toward sustainability.

Another successful public relations campaign is the "Love Food Hate Waste" initiative in the United Kingdom. This campaign aimed to raise awareness about food waste and encourage individuals to reduce their food waste through simple behavioural changes. The campaign utilized various PR strategies, including media engagement, social media campaigns, and partnerships with celebrity chefs (Tregear, 2015). The campaign's impact assessment revealed that it effectively reached a large audience, resulting in increased awareness of food waste issues and positive behaviour changes, such as meal planning and better utilisation of leftovers.

The impact of public relations campaigns on combating misinformation and promoting evidence-based policies for sustainable development has been analysed in several empirical studies. For instance, a study by Cho and Gower (2020) examined the role of strategic communication in promoting sustainable development initiatives. The study highlighted the importance of evidence-based messaging in countering misinformation and shaping public opinion. It emphasized that effective PR campaigns should focus on providing clear and accessible information derived from scientific evidence. Such campaigns help combat misinformation by providing accurate and reliable information to the public.

Case studies have also demonstrated the impact of PR campaigns on combating misinformation. The "Renewable Energy – Feel the Power" campaign in Sweden aimed to counter misinformation and increase public support for renewable energy projects. The campaign employed a combination of media engagement, online platforms, and public events to educate the public about the benefits of renewable energy and debunk common myths (Holmberg & Karlsson, 2018). The evaluation of the campaign revealed that it successfully increased public awareness and knowledge about renewable energy, leading to improved public acceptance and support for renewable energy projects.

Furthermore, the impact of PR campaigns on promoting evidence-based policies can be observed in the case of the "Plastic Free July" campaign. This global initiative encourages individuals to reduce their plastic consumption and raise awareness about the environmental impact of single-use plastics. The campaign utilizes social media, community events, and partnerships with organizations to spread its message (Fang, 2020). The campaign's success can be seen in the increasing adoption of plastic-free practices by individuals and the growing support for policies that regulate single-use plastics.

Extensive research and case studies have showcased the efficacy of public relations campaigns in countering misinformation and advancing evidence-based policies for sustainable development. Prominent campaigns like "Cool Australia," "Love Food Hate Waste," "Renewable Energy – Feel the Power," and "Plastic Free July" have effectively raised public awareness, influenced attitudes, and fostered desirable behaviours. Through the dissemination of accurate information, debunking of myths, and active public engagement across multiple platforms, these campaigns play a pivotal role in combating misinformation and championing evidence-based policies for sustainable development.

### **Theoretical Underpinning**

In the context of utilising public relations to combat misinformation and promote evidence-based policies for sustainable development, two theories offer valuable

insights: the theory of Social Amplification of Risk, and the Elaboration Likelihood Model.

### **The Theory of Social Amplification of Risk**

The theory of social amplification of risk provides valuable insights into understanding the role of public relations in combating misinformation and promoting evidence-based policies for sustainable development. The theory posits that social processes can amplify or attenuate the perceived risks associated with specific issues or events, shaping public perception and influencing behaviours (Kasperson *et al.*, 1988). It suggests that risk perceptions are not solely based on objective characteristics but are also influenced by social interactions, media coverage, and information dissemination.

In the context of this study, the theory of social amplification of risk is relevant as it helps explain how misinformation can be amplified or mitigated through public relations efforts. Misinformation, when left unaddressed, can be amplified through various social processes, such as the spread of false information on social media platforms, sensationalized media coverage, and the influence of opinion leaders. This amplification can lead to heightened risk perceptions and hinder progress towards sustainable development.

On the other hand, public relations initiatives can play a crucial role in attenuating the amplification of misinformation. By effectively countering misinformation through strategic communication, public relations professionals can provide accurate and evidence-based information to the public. This can help reduce risk perceptions associated with misinformation and promote a better understanding of sustainable development issues.

The theory of social amplification of risk is significant to this study as it emphasizes the importance of public relations in shaping risk perceptions and influencing public opinion. By applying the principles of this theory, public relations practitioners can strategically disseminate accurate information, correct misinformation, and engage in dialogue with key stakeholders. This can help mitigate the amplification of misinformation, build public trust, and promote evidence-based policies for sustainable development.

In essence, the theory of social amplification of risk highlights the dynamics of risk perception and the role of public relations in combating misinformation. By leveraging this theory, public relations practitioners can develop targeted communication strategies that address the social processes amplifying misinformation and promote evidence-based policies for sustainable development. The application of this theory provides a valuable framework for understanding the significance of public relations in countering misinformation and facilitating informed decision-making.

### **The Elaboration Likelihood Model (ELM)**

The Elaboration Likelihood Model (ELM) offers a valuable theoretical framework to understand the role of public relations (PR) in combating misinformation and promoting evidence-based policies for sustainable development. The ELM, developed by Petty and Cacioppo (1986), posits that individuals engage in two routes of information processing: the central route and the peripheral route. The central route involves thoughtful consideration and elaboration of information, while the peripheral route relies on heuristics and cues without deep cognitive processing.

In the context of this study, the ELM is relevant as it helps explain how individuals process information and make decisions regarding sustainable development policies. According to the ELM, when individuals are motivated and can process information centrally, they are more likely to engage in systematic thinking, critically evaluate the information, and form attitudes based on the quality and relevance of the evidence presented.

Applying the ELM to this study suggests that public relations initiatives need to consider the level of motivation and ability of the target audience to process information centrally. For instance, individuals who are highly involved or have a strong interest in sustainable development are more likely to engage in central processing and be influenced by evidence-based policies presented through PR campaigns. On the other hand, individuals with low involvement or limited cognitive resources may rely more on peripheral cues, such as the credibility of the source or emotional appeals.

The ELM is significant to this study as it emphasizes the importance of tailoring communication strategies based on the level of audience involvement and ability to process information centrally. By understanding the cognitive processes and routes of persuasion, PR practitioners can design campaigns that effectively engage individuals and facilitate attitude change toward evidence-based policies. This theoretical framework provides insights into how to deliver messages, provide supporting evidence, and address misinformation in a way that maximizes the likelihood of attitude change and behaviour adoption.

Research by Eagly and Chaiken (2017) supports the applicability of the ELM in the context of public relations and attitude change. They emphasize the importance of matching the persuasive message with the audience's level of involvement and ability to process information. By employing the central route of persuasion, where individuals are motivated and able to engage in critical thinking, PR campaigns can foster a deeper understanding of sustainable development issues and promote evidence-based policies.

Thus, the Elaboration Likelihood Model is a relevant and valuable theoretical framework for this study on utilising public relations to combat misinformation and promote evidence-based policies for sustainable development. It highlights the role of central and peripheral routes of information processing and emphasizes the need for tailored communication strategies. By incorporating the principles of the ELM into PR initiatives, practitioners can enhance the effectiveness of their campaigns in influencing attitudes, countering misinformation, and fostering support for evidence-based policies.

Given the theories explored, the cognitive dissonance theory highlighted the psychological factors at play when combating misinformation, emphasizing the importance of addressing conflicting beliefs and providing clear information to promote alignment with evidence-based policies. The theory of social amplification of risk underscored the role of public relations in mitigating the amplification of misinformation, shaping risk perceptions, and promoting a better understanding of sustainable development issues. The Elaboration Likelihood Model elucidated the routes of information processing and suggested tailoring communication strategies based on audience involvement and cognitive processing to maximize attitude change and behaviour adoption. By integrating these theoretical perspectives, public relations practitioners could design effective campaigns to combat misinformation, promote evidence-based policies, and facilitate progress toward sustainable development goals.

### **Methodology**

In this study, a mixed-methods research design was employed, combining qualitative and quantitative approaches. The population included public relations professionals, policymakers, stakeholders involved in sustainable development, and the general public in Nigeria. The sample size for the qualitative component (interviews) aimed to achieve data saturation, typically involving 15 participants. For the quantitative component (surveys), a representative sample size of 110 participants from the general public. Purposive sampling was used for interviews, while a combination of convenience sampling and stratified random sampling was used for surveys. Data analysis involved thematic analysis for qualitative data and descriptive statistics for quantitative data.

### **Qualitative Findings - Thematic Summaries:**

#### **Impact of Misinformation on Sustainable Development**

During the interviews, participants consistently expressed their concerns about the detrimental effects of misinformation on public understanding and behaviours related to sustainable development. They highlighted that misinformation creates confusion, skepticism, and a lack of trust in evidence-based policies. As a result, progress towards sustainable development goals is hindered, as public support and engagement are undermined. This theme underscores the urgent need to address the negative impact of misinformation on sustainable development efforts.

#### **Challenges in Combating Misinformation**

Participants identified several challenges in addressing misinformation, with a particular focus on the rapid spread of false information through social media platforms. They emphasized the lack of media literacy and critical thinking skills among the public as a significant barrier to countering misinformation effectively. Additionally, participants highlighted the difficulty of correcting misinformation once it has been widely circulated and ingrained in public perception. These challenges underscore the complex nature of addressing misinformation and highlight the importance of developing effective strategies to overcome these obstacles.

#### **Role of Public Relations in Addressing Misinformation**

Participants recognized the vital role of public relations (PR) in combating misinformation and promoting evidence-based policies for sustainable development. They emphasized the need for effective communication strategies, such as clear and accessible messaging, to counter misinformation effectively. The participants also stressed the importance of collaboration between PR professionals, scientific experts, and policymakers to ensure the accurate dissemination of information. This theme highlights the significance of PR initiatives in addressing misinformation and emphasizes the need for coordinated efforts among various stakeholders to combat misinformation effectively. The thematic summaries derived from the qualitative findings provide valuable insights into the impact of misinformation on sustainable development, the challenges faced in countering it, and the role of public relations in addressing this issue. These findings align with the existing literature on the negative consequences of misinformation and the importance of effective communication strategies. They underscore the urgency of developing comprehensive approaches to combat misinformation and promote evidence-based policies for sustainable development.

**Quantitative Findings - Descriptive Statistics:**

**Table 1: Demographic Characteristics of Participants**

Demographic Characteristic	Frequency	Percentage
<b>Gender</b>		
- Male	45	40%
- Female	65	60%
<b>Total</b>	<b>110</b>	<b>100%</b>
<b>Age Group</b>		
- 18-25 years	20	18%
- 26-35 years	35	32%
- 36-45 years	40	36%
- 46+ years	15	14%
<b>Total</b>	<b>110</b>	<b>100%</b>

Source: Field Survey, 2023

Table 1 presents the demographic characteristics of the participants. In terms of gender, 45 participants were male, accounting for 40% of the total, while 65 participants were female, representing 60%. Regarding age groups, 20 participants were aged 18-25 years (18%), 35 participants were aged 26-35 years (32%), 40 participants were aged 36-45 years (36%) and 15 participants were 46 years or older (14%).

**Table 2: Attitudes towards Sustainable Development**

Attitude	Frequency	Percentage
Supportive	80	72%
Indifferent	15	14%
Skeptical	15	14%
<b>Total</b>	<b>110</b>	<b>100%</b>

Source: Field Survey, 2023

Table 2 displayed attitudes toward sustainable development. The majority of respondents were supportive, with a frequency of 80, accounting for 72% of the total. A smaller percentage expressed indifference, with a frequency of 15, representing 14%. An equal number of respondents were skeptical, also with a frequency of 15, making up 14% of the attitudes.

**Table 3: Sources of Information on Sustainable Development**

Information Source	Frequency	Percentage
Social Media	55	50%
News Media (TV, and newspapers)	30	23%
Government Websites	10	9%
Scientific Journals/Research	15	18%
<b>Total</b>	<b>110</b>	<b>100%</b>

Source: Field Survey, 2023

In Table 3, different sources of information on sustainable development were highlighted. Social media emerged as the predominant source, accounting for 50% of the total information sources with a frequency of 55. News media (television and newspapers) was the second most common source, representing 23% with a frequency of 30. Government websites were less frequently used, comprising 9% of the sources with a frequency of 10. Scientific journals/research contributed 18% of the information sources, with a frequency of 15.

### **Analysis and Discussion**

The analysis of qualitative and quantitative findings, about the research objectives, existing literature, and theoretical frameworks, allows for a comprehensive understanding of the topic.

1. **Impact of Misinformation on Sustainable Development:** The qualitative findings highlight the detrimental effects of misinformation on sustainable development. Participants expressed concerns about the spread of misinformation leading to confusion, scepticism, and a lack of trust in evidence-based policies. These findings align with existing literature that emphasizes the negative consequences of misinformation on public attitudes and behaviours related to sustainability (Xu *et al.*, 2021).
2. **Challenges in Combating Misinformation:** The qualitative data identified several challenges in addressing misinformation. The rapid spread of false information through social media platforms emerged as a significant obstacle. This finding supports previous research that highlights the role of social media in the dissemination and amplification of misinformation (Lewandowsky *et al.*, 2020). Theoretical frameworks such as the social amplification of risk framework provide insights into how misinformation spreads through social networks and exacerbates public uncertainty and misinformation (Kasperson *et al.*, 1988).
3. **Role of Public Relations in Addressing Misinformation:** The qualitative findings underscore the crucial role of PR in combating misinformation and promoting evidence-based policies. Effective communication strategies, such as clear and accessible messaging, were identified as key in countering misinformation. These findings align with existing literature that emphasizes the importance of strategic communication in addressing misinformation and shaping public opinion (Cho & Gower, 2020). Theoretical frameworks like the Elaboration Likelihood Model provide insights into how effective communication can lead to attitude change and behaviour adoption through central and peripheral routes of persuasion (Petty & Cacioppo, 1986).
4. **Integration of Qualitative and Quantitative Findings:** The quantitative findings provide additional insights into the research objectives. Demographic characteristics indicate the diversity of participants, allowing for a broader understanding of attitudes towards sustainable development. The high percentage of supportive attitudes suggests a positive disposition towards sustainable development goals. The quantitative data on information sources indicates the dominance of social media as a source of information, highlighting the importance of targeting communication efforts through these channels. Integrating qualitative and quantitative findings allows for a comprehensive understanding of the complex interplay between attitudes, sources of information, and PR strategies.

Overall, synthesising the analysis and discussion conducted in this study, about the research objectives, existing literature, and theoretical frameworks, the importance of utilising PR techniques to combat misinformation and promote evidence-based policies for sustainable development was emphasized. The findings highlighted the negative impact of misinformation, the challenges faced in addressing it, and the role of effective communication strategies in countering misinformation. The integration of qualitative and quantitative findings provided a more nuanced understanding of the topic and informed the development of PR initiatives that could effectively shape public attitudes and behaviours towards sustainable development.

### **Conclusion**

The findings of this study highlight the significance of utilising public relations (PR) techniques to combat misinformation and promote evidence-based policies for sustainable development. The impact of misinformation on sustainable development was evident, with participants expressing concerns about its detrimental effects on public understanding and behaviours. Challenges in combating misinformation, such as the rapid spread of false information through social media, were identified. However, the study also emphasized the crucial role of PR in addressing misinformation, emphasizing the need for effective communication strategies and collaborations between PR professionals, scientific experts, and policymakers.

By integrating qualitative and quantitative findings, a comprehensive understanding of the topic was achieved. The analysis provided insights into the complex interplay between attitudes, sources of information, and PR strategies. These findings align with existing literature and theoretical frameworks, supporting the importance of strategic communication in countering misinformation and shaping public opinion.

### **Recommendations**

Based on the findings of this study, several recommendations are proposed to utilize public relations techniques in combating misinformation and promoting evidence-based policies for sustainable development.

Firstly, efforts should be made to enhance media literacy and critical thinking skills among the public. Educational programs and initiatives should be developed to improve individual's ability to identify reliable sources of information and evaluate them critically.

Secondly, close collaboration between PR professionals, scientific experts, and policymakers is crucial. By working together, they can ensure accurate information dissemination, increase public trust, and promote evidence-based policies.

Thirdly, communication strategies should be tailored for different platforms, especially social media. This includes using engaging and accessible messaging, leveraging influencers and thought leaders, and actively monitoring and addressing misinformation in real time.

Fourthly, ongoing evaluation and monitoring of PR initiatives are essential to assess their effectiveness and make necessary adjustments. This includes measuring changes in public attitudes and behaviours, tracking the impact of campaigns on misinformation levels, and adapting strategies accordingly.

Lastly, fostering partnerships and engaging diverse stakeholders, such as community organizations, educational institutions, and NGOs, can enhance the reach and impact of PR initiatives. Collaboration with these stakeholders can leverage

collective expertise and resources in combating misinformation and promoting sustainable development.

Thus, by implementing these recommendations, public relations can effectively combat misinformation and promote evidence-based policies for sustainable development. These recommendations aim to guide future PR efforts, contribute to a well-informed public, and facilitate progress towards sustainable development goals. By addressing the challenges posed by misinformation and leveraging strategic communication, a more sustainable and informed society can be fostered.

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