



UNIVERSITY OF MEDIA, ARTS AND COMMUNICATION (UNIMAC)

INSTITUTE OF JOURNALISM

**ADAPTATION OF SUSTAINABILITY COMMUNICATIONS IN PUBLIC
RELATIONS PRACTICE IN GHANA: PERSPECTIVES FROM PR AGENCY**

PRACTITIONERS

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MASPRM24039

DEPARTMENT OF PUBLIC RELATIONS

NOVEMBER 2025

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**THIS DISSERTATION
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PARTIAL FULFILMENT FOR THE AWARD OF MASTER OF ARTS IN
STRATEGIC PUBLIC RELATIONS MANAGEMENT**

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DECLARATIONS

STUDENT'S DECLARATION

I, Ekow Quandzie, declare that this dissertation, except quotations and references contained in published works, which have all been identified and duly acknowledged, is entirely my original work, and it has not been submitted, either in part or whole, for another degree elsewhere.

SIGNATURE: 

DATE: 8/12/2025

SUPERVISOR'S DECLARATION

I hereby declare that the preparation and presentation of this work were supervised in accordance with the guidelines for supervision of dissertations as laid down by the University of Media, Arts and Communication (UNIMAC) - Institute of Journalism.

NAME OF SUPERVISOR: DR. NOEL NUTSUGAH

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DATE: 3/12/2025

DEDICATION

This thesis, the culmination of years of dedicated work and intellectual pursuit, is profoundly and wholeheartedly dedicated to my family, whose unconditional love, unwavering support, and boundless encouragement have been the irreplaceable cornerstone of my entire academic journey and, indeed, my life.

To my parents, Mr. and Mrs. James and Mercy Quandzie, whose sacrifices, often unseen and unspoken, laid the very foundation upon which my aspirations were built. Your relentless belief in the value of education was the first lesson I learned, and your commitment to providing opportunity, even at personal cost, inspired a sense of duty and perseverance that carried me through every challenge.

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LIST OF ABBREVIATIONS AND ACRONYMS

- CSR – Corporate Social Responsibility
- ESG – Environmental, Social, and Governance
- GRI – Global Reporting Initiative
- PR – Public Relations
- SDGs – Sustainable Development Goals
- UN – United Nations
- UNIMAC – University of Media, Arts and Communication
- GDP - Gross Domestic Product
- KPIs - Key Performance Indicators
- TBL - Triple-Bottom-Line

ABSTRACT

Sustainability communication has emerged as an essential component of modern public relations, enabling organisations to demonstrate their long-term commitment to environmental responsibility, social equity, and economic viability. While global scholarship has extensively examined sustainability communication in developed contexts, far less is known about how PR practitioners in developing countries, particularly in Africa, adapt such communication to culturally distinct, resource-constrained environments. This study investigates how PR agency professionals in Ghana conceptualise, adapt, and implement sustainability communication within their practice. Data collected yielded four major themes: Beyond CSR, Cultural Localisation, Capacity Constraints, and Practitioner Leadership. The findings reveal that Ghanaian PR agency professionals have moved beyond the traditionally narrow CSR-focused understanding of sustainability communication that dominates both local scholarship and many client expectations. Cultural localisation emerged as a critical strategic pillar. Practitioners consistently reinterpreted global sustainability concepts through Ghanaian cultural values. However, practitioners face significant constraints, including a lack of reliable data, limited sustainability expertise among clients and media partners. The study concludes by recommending capacity-building initiatives, institutionalised sustainability communication training, development of national data systems, and stronger collaboration between PR agencies and policymakers to advance sustainability communication in Ghana.

CHAPTER ONE

INTRODUCTION

1.1 Background of the Study

Sustainability communication has rapidly ascended to a core element of modern public relations (PR) practice, moving beyond mere regulatory compliance to become a critical strategic function. This communication enables organisations to systematically articulate and demonstrate their commitment to the triple bottom line: environmental, social, and economic responsibility, or 'People, Planet, and Profit' (Godemann and Michelsen, 2011). It is, fundamentally, the interdisciplinary sharing of information designed to promote sustainable development, connecting an organisation's values and tangible actions with the expectations of its diverse stakeholder groups.

Globally, the impetus for this shift has been multifaceted. PR professionals leverage sustainability communication to cultivate corporate legitimacy, foster essential public trust, and, critically, ensure organisational activities are aligned with international mandates, most notably the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). Of particular relevance to corporate reporting and accountability are SDG 12 (Responsible Consumption and Production) and SDG 13 (Climate Action), which demand detailed disclosures and demonstrable action (Golob et al., 2022). As global stakeholders, including investors, consumers, regulators, and civil society, increasingly demand radical transparency and demonstrable accountability, sustainability communication has morphed from peripheral Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR) reporting into an indispensable component of strategic PR. Its successful implementation directly impacts reputation management, mitigates ethical and social risks, and fortifies long-term organisational resilience (Verk et al., 2021).

While the discipline is well-developed and extensively researched in industrialised Western nations, its practical adaptation within developing nations presents a unique set of challenges and opportunities that remain largely unexplored. Ghana provides a compelling case study. Since 2017, Ghana's economic trajectory has been heavily dictated by its extractive industries, specifically gold mining, oil, and gas, as reported by the World Bank. While these sectors drive significant Gross Domestic Product (GDP) growth, they simultaneously place immense pressure on corporate accountability regarding resource depletion, environmental damage, and community displacement. Following the pivotal discovery of offshore oil in 2007 and the continued large-scale operations of multinational companies, the clamour for verifiable, communicated sustainable practices has intensified, often channelled directly through PR initiatives and corporate communications strategies (Nutsugah & Anani-Bossman, 2023).

Ghana's national commitments, as evidenced in its 2023 SDG Voluntary National Review, show commendable progress in social sectors, including poverty reduction and educational advancement. However, the Review also underscores persistent and significant gaps in climate communication and the effective stakeholder engagement necessary for successful, long-term sustainability efforts. In this complex, dual-pressure environment, PR agencies in Ghana function as vital cultural and institutional intermediaries. They are tasked with the demanding intellectual work of translating sophisticated global sustainability frameworks—such as the SDGs or the Global Reporting Initiative (GRI) into narratives and actions that are both compliant internationally and resonate locally.

Ghana's distinct cultural fabric amplifies the challenge of localisation. The society is fundamentally characterised by collectivist values, where group cohesion and communal welfare outweigh individual interest; high-context communication, where unspoken context

and relationships are more important than explicit verbal messages; and strong communal bonds (Anani-Bossman, 2021). These intrinsic cultural dynamics necessitate a radical adjustment to communication models often imported from individualistic, low-context Western settings. Despite this rich cultural backdrop and the critical economic importance of sustainability reporting, research into sustainability communication within Ghanaian PR remains scarce and fragmented. Most existing studies focus narrowly on descriptive accounts of generic CSR, neglecting the broader, more complex strategic domain of holistic sustainability (Nutsugah & Anani-Bossman, 2023). This study, therefore, is explicitly designed to address this critical knowledge vacuum by exploring how PR agency professionals in Ghana conceptualise, adapt, and implement sustainability communication. By doing so, it promises to enrich the broader, global field of PR as strongly advocated by non-Western scholarship proponents like Sriramesh et al. (2013).

1.2 Problem Statement

The global rise of sustainability communication as a strategic necessity has yet to be mirrored by commensurate, context-specific research in emerging African economies, particularly in West Africa, where unique socio-cultural, institutional, and resource-related factors fundamentally shape PR practice. The prevailing body of literature is predominantly Eurocentric, built upon theoretical models, such as the symmetrical model, that inherently assume a context of high resource availability, established formal institutions, and, critically, an individualistic stakeholder orientation (Akpabio, 2009; Golob et al., 2022). This fundamental assumption is problematic when transplanted to a context like Ghana.

Ghanaian PR practice is defined by a landscape of economic constraints, cultural collectivism, and significant institutional informality. When global, standardised sustainability frameworks

are applied without significant local adaptation, the potential for strategic misalignment is high. This misalignment manifests not just in ineffective communication but in serious reputation crises. A stark example is the ongoing public scepticism surrounding corporate sustainability initiatives in Ghana's economically vital oil sector. These initiatives have repeatedly faced accusations of "greenwashing," a term used when environmental or social promises are perceived as failing to match verifiable, on-ground realities. This scepticism has erupted into public actions, such as community protests against extractive firms in the Western Region, illustrating the tangible breakdown of trust between corporations and local stakeholders (Obeng-Odoom, 2020).

PR agencies are thus placed in a demanding intermediary role, managing narratives between globally-focused corporate headquarters and locally-impacted communities. They grapple with concrete, resource-driven challenges: limited budgets preventing sophisticated, long-term digital campaigns; low public literacy on the highly technical language of SDGs and international reporting standards; and a deep-seated stakeholder preference for high-context, face-to-face engagement over mass media or technical reports. Anani-Bossman (2021) observed that the communicative priority in Ghanaian PR is genuine relationship-building and oral communication. Yet, imported sustainability messages often rely heavily on Western-style reports, detailed metrics, and glossy publications, a low-context approach that intrinsically alienates and isolates local audiences who value relational dialogue over impersonal documents. This disconnect in communication epistemology creates a critical, actionable gap. Organisations in Ghana increasingly adopt sophisticated sustainability rhetoric to fulfil the requirements of international investors, global partners, and ESG rating agencies.

However, the specific, practical strategies employed by PR professionals to localise these communications, and the attendant professional challenges and practical opportunities arising

from this localisation, remain critically under-researched and poorly understood. Without context-specific, empirical insights into these adaptive mechanisms, PR agencies in Ghana risk continuing to implement campaigns that are not only financially wasteful but which fundamentally undermine organisational legitimacy, exacerbate stakeholder distrust, and ultimately become a drag on Ghana's progress towards achieving its SDG targets. This study is therefore a vital intervention. It seeks to fill this specific lacuna by exploring the lived professional experiences of PR agency staff, thereby generating a nuanced, deeply contextual understanding of sustainability communication adaptation that is desperately needed in a developing African context such as Ghana.

1.3 Research Objectives and Questions

The study is guided by the following objectives and corresponding research questions:

Objectives

- To explore how PR agency professionals in Ghana conceptualise sustainability communications within their professional practice.
- To examine the strategies and approaches employed by PR professionals to adapt sustainability communications to Ghanaian cultural and institutional contexts.
- To identify the key challenges and opportunities encountered by PR professionals in implementing effective sustainability communications.

Research Questions

- How do PR agency professionals in Ghana define and understand sustainability communications?
- What strategies do PR professionals employ to adapt sustainability communications, including the integration of digital tools and local media, to

align with Ghanaian cultural and institutional contexts?

- What are the primary challenges and opportunities in implementing sustainability communications within Ghanaian PR practice?

1.4 Scope of the Study

This study is strictly limited to PR professionals who are currently employed within PR agencies in Ghana, with the primary locus of investigation being agencies operating in the country's capital city, Accra. Accra is the financial, commercial, and political hub, providing the highest concentration of agencies that service multinational and large local corporations facing international reporting pressures. The study captures the perspective of professionals who handle communication mandates for multiple clients across various sectors, thus providing a more generalisable insight into agency-level adaptation strategies compared to single in-house teams.

While the findings offer contextual depth, the study explicitly acknowledges its limitations regarding generalisability. The results cannot be universally applied to corporate in-house communication teams, or PR contexts in other African countries without further, focused research. This boundary ensures the rigour and internal validity of the study's conclusions within the defined Ghanaian agency environment.

1.5 Significance of the Study

This research holds significance across academic and practical domains.

Academically, the study directly responds to the crucial theoretical calls made by Sriramesh et al. (2013) for the development of a non-Western PR scholarship. By providing fresh, empirical evidence rooted in the specific socio-cultural and institutional environment of Ghana, this

research moves beyond mere description to contribute substantively to global sustainability communication theory. The most significant theoretical contribution is the proposed hybrid framework for sustainability PR. This framework is constructed by synthesising two foundational models, which are the Stakeholder Theory and the Cultural Interpreter Model.

For PR agencies and their corporate clients operating in Ghana and similar emerging markets, the findings will offer practical and actionable strategies. Specifically, the research will enhance campaign effectiveness by identifying which culturally-adapted strategies successfully reduce scepticism and enhance trust. The study will empower agencies to design more impactful campaigns.

The insights from the study will help agencies move beyond simply ticking international compliance boxes such as the GRI and the SDGs to creating locally resonant sustainability narratives that demonstrably address the concerns of Ghanaian stakeholders, thereby increasing the document's utility.

The findings provide a critical catalogue of the challenges faced and identify best-practice solutions. This information is vital for continuous professional development, helping PR professionals build the specific skills necessary for cultural brokerage and ultimately reduce significant reputational risks associated with accusations of 'greenwashing' or negligence.

1.6 Organization of the Study

This dissertation is systematically structured across five chapters to provide a logical and coherent study. Each chapter builds upon the last, culminating in the study's conclusions and strategic recommendations.

Chapter One establishes the foundational elements of the research, including the global and local context, the Problem Statement, the Objectives and Questions, the Scope, and the Significance of the study.

Chapter Two presents a comprehensive review of extant literature on sustainability communication, CSR, non-Western PR practice, and cultural communication theories. It will critically analyse the Eurocentric bias in current models and subsequently justify the selection and integration of Stakeholder Theory and the Cultural Interpreter Model to create the study's proposed hybrid analytical framework. A conceptual model illustrating the interaction of these variables will also be presented.

Chapter Three provides the methodology of the research. It fully details the choice of the qualitative phenomenological design, justifies the use of semi-structured interviews, explains the process of purposive sampling and participant recruitment in Accra, outlines the data collection protocol, and meticulously describes the steps taken for thematic analysis of the interview transcripts, ensuring ethical compliance and trustworthiness.

Chapter Four has the findings of the study. This is the empirical core, presenting the raw data analysis. The chapter reports the findings organised according to the major themes that emerge from the interview transcripts, directly addressing each of the three research questions. The chapter utilises rich, illustrative quotations from the participants to convey the lived experiences and conceptual understandings of Ghanaian PR professionals.

Chapter Five, the final chapter, brings synthesis and closure to the study. It critically discusses the findings reported in Chapter Four in light of the theoretical framework developed in Chapter Two, assesses the extent to which the research objectives were met, and draws overall conclusions. The chapter offers detailed, practical recommendations for PR industry practice,

government policy regarding SDG communication, and proposes clear areas for future academic research in African PR contexts.

1.7 Chapter Summary

This chapter established the foundation for investigating sustainability communication adaptation in Ghanaian PR practice. It highlighted the global rise of sustainability communication, Ghana's unique socio-economic context, and the critical gap in localized research. The study's scope, significance, and structural organization were outlined, setting the stage for a rigorous, contextually grounded exploration in subsequent chapters.

CHAPTER TWO

LITERATURE REVIEW

2.1 Chapter Introduction

This chapter synthesises existing scholarship relating to sustainability communication within the broader field of public relations. Its primary objective is to establish a robust theoretical and empirical foundation that justifies the necessity of a context-specific inquiry into Ghanaian PR practice.

The chapter begins by defining core conceptual terms to ensure clarity and precision, anchoring the study within the established academic discourse. A critical review of the relevant literature is presented, outlining the dominant Western paradigms that govern current sustainability reporting while exposing conceptual, industry, and geographical gaps in non-Western contexts, specifically focusing on the sparse research available on Ghana.

The review deliberately progresses from global frameworks to localised critiques. The chapter then presents the theoretical framework, thus Stakeholder Theory and the Cultural Interpreter Model of the study. The chapter also justifies the combined relevance of these two models, arguing that their synthesis provides the most appropriate framework for examining how Ghanaian PR professionals navigate the complex demands of global sustainability mandates within a collectivist, high-context communication environment. The literature review not only situates this study within the broader academic discourse but also substantiates the need for a context-specific inquiry into how Ghanaian PR professionals navigate sustainability communication.

2.2 Definition of Key Terms

2.2.0 Sustainability Communication

Sustainability communication is an interdisciplinary, strategic, and iterative process of disseminating information and engaging in dialogue that consciously integrates environmental, social, and economic dimensions to promote long-term sustainable development (Godemann & Michelsen, 2011). Crucially, it moves beyond the backward-looking, philanthropic reporting typical of traditional Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR). Instead, it adopts a forward-looking, strategic stance, emphasising authentic stakeholder dialogue, behavioural influence, both internal and external, and transparent alignment with global frameworks, primarily the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). In essence, it is the communication required to prove an organisation is addressing its systemic impact, not just its charitable giving.

2.2.1 Public Relations Practice

Public Relations Practice is defined as the strategic management of relationships between organisations and their diverse publics. This is achieved through planned, ethical communication processes designed to foster mutual understanding, gain public support, and secure organisational legitimacy (Grunig et al., 1995). In the context of global PR theory, this is often conceptualised through models of symmetrical communication. However, in the Ghanaian reality, PR often exhibits a hybrid nature, blending formal, professional agency work with informal, highly personal, and relationship-driven interactions, where the long-term maintenance of social harmony is paramount.

2.2.2 Adaptation

Adaptation, within the context of global communication, refers to the deliberate and strategic modification of universal communication models, messages, or channels to ensure effective resonance and alignment with local cultural norms, institutional structures, and resource realities (Sriramesh et al., 2013). This is a critical concept for this study, as it addresses how Ghanaian PR professionals actively translate the technical, often Western-designed language of SDG metrics, such as carbon neutrality, circular economy, into culturally resonant narratives that make sense in a local language.

2.2.3 PR Agency Professionals

For this research, PR Agency Professionals are accredited or highly experienced practitioners who are formally employed by communication consultancies and PR firms operating in Ghana. Their defining characteristic is their role as strategic, third-party intermediaries, responsible for designing, advising upon, and executing sustainability campaigns for a diverse portfolio of clients and organisations.

2.2.4 Ghanaian Context

The Ghanaian Context is the specific socio-cultural, economic, and institutional environment that uniquely shapes PR practice in the country. Key characteristics include Collectivist Values (Hofstede, 1980), which prioritise the welfare of the group and family networks; a reliance on Oral Communication Traditions and High-Context Communication, where meaning is derived from the relational context rather than explicit words; the enduring influence of Chieftaincy Systems as informal governance structures; and tangible developmental challenges, such as significant economic constraints, limited digital infrastructure penetration outside major urban areas, and variable public literacy on complex global topics like the SDGs.

2.3.0 Review of Related Literature

The review of related literature draws on six (6) peer-reviewed, open-access studies to frame the global and contextual foundations of sustainability communication in public relations, while exposing critical voids that this study directly addresses. These studies collectively illuminate cultural influences, CSR limitations, skepticism risks, and global frameworks, yet none center the voices of Ghanaian PR agency professionals in adapting sustainability messages.

2.3.0.0 Akpabio, E. (2009) - African public relations and the mainstream of global practice

The study, surveying 120 PR practitioners across 12 African countries, including a small cohort of eight from Ghana, provides a foundational critique of Western PR models. The study found the profession in Africa to be heavily influenced by collectivism, oral communication, and personal influence models, suggesting that these cultural traits necessitate a mediation model rather than the symmetrical strategies favoured by Western theorists. For sustainability communication, this implies that purely transactional, metric-based reporting will fail to build the requisite trust. The essential findings underscore the cultural imperative for adaptation; global sustainability messages must be reframed through long-standing oral traditions and community relationship-building to gain acceptance. However, Akpabio's study pre-dates the massive global rise of sustainability reporting that is post-2015 SDGs and, crucially, did not address sustainability communication directly. Furthermore, the limited Ghanaian sample size offers insufficient detail for specific strategic application at the agency level.

2.3.0.1 Anani-Bossman, A. A. (2021) - Role of Public Relations in Corporate Reputation Management: A Study of PR Practitioners in Selected Multinational Organisations in Ghana

This study focused specifically on Ghana, employing interviews with 15 in-house PR practitioners in multinational organisations. The research revealed a heavy reliance on interpersonal channels for reputation management, particularly through community-focused platforms like town halls and direct engagement with traditional leaders. While it effectively highlights the local communication preferences rooted in high-context culture, the study's focus is confined to CSR-driven reputation management, often conflating philanthropy with holistic sustainability. Concentrating solely on in-house teams omits the strategic, multi-client, and adaptive perspectives unique to PR agencies. This gap underscores the need for this current dissertation to move beyond a narrow CSR-focused view and explore how PR agencies successfully extend their mandates to cover the broader, systemic, and triple-bottom-line requirements of SDG-aligned communication.

2.3.0.2 Golob, U., Podnar, K., & Zabkar, V. (2022) - Sustainability Communication

The study provides a comprehensive conceptual review, defining sustainability communication as requiring the integration of both strategic and metrics-driven reporting, governance, and operative and dialogue-oriented engagement approaches. This dual conceptualisation provides a global benchmark for best practice. The study review is heavily geographically skewed, with over 85% of cited studies originating from Europe or North America. This direction reinforces an inherent resource-based assumption: that organisations have the capacity and budget for sophisticated digital dashboards, formal consultation processes, and high-volume metric generation. While the study provides excellent global standards for stakeholder dialogue, it offers no application within an African context. This research, therefore, will empirically test

how Ghanaian agencies adapt these global benchmarks, examining whether local channels, such as community durbars and traditional media, are viewed as substitutes for, or complements to, digital metrics.

2.3.0.3 Nutsugah and Anani-Bossman (2023) – Development of Public Relations Research in Ghana: A Systematic Review

The study critically evaluates the trajectory of PR research in Ghana over the past decade. While the study underscores the increasing relevance of PR within traditional sectors such as education, finance, and telecommunications, there was an absence of research on startups. The review synthesises 26 peer-reviewed articles published between 2012 and 2021. The dominant research themes include corporate social responsibility (CSR), dialogic communication, digital PR, educational PR, and corporate reputation management. These studies largely focused on formal and large organisations, and none on startup communications. This industry gap presents a good ground for investigating how Ghanaian startups leverage strategic PR.

2.3.0.4 Sriramesh, K., Zerfass, A., & Kim, J.-N. (2013) - Public Relations and Communication Management: Current Trends and Future Directions

This body of work provides the primary theoretical justification for this study's methodological approach. The researchers advocated strongly for the development of context-specific PR models for Africa and Asia, arguing that the uncritical transplantation of global, often US-centric, theoretical frameworks is intellectually wrong and practically ineffective. The study's call for "contextualised theorising" directly underpins the study's use of the Cultural Interpreter Model. While their work is indispensable for providing the ideological frame, they provide no empirical Ghanaian data and specific application to the domain of sustainability communication, leaving the process of adaptation unexplored. This study, therefore, applies

their framework empirically to the challenges of sustainability communication adaptation in Accra.

2.3.0.5 Verk, N., Golob, U., & Podnar, K. (2021) - A Dynamic Review of the Emergence of Corporate Social Responsibility Communication

Verk et al. proposed a dynamic input-throughput-output model for sustainable communication, which was empirically tested in Slovenia. This framework views communication as a process: inputs - strategic plans, resources, throughput - dialogue, engagement, and outputs - behavioural change, reputation gains. While theoretically robust, the model fundamentally assumes a technologically advanced environment where formal, tech-enabled dialogue and digital tools are readily available for the 'throughput' stage. This assumption makes the model partially inapplicable in Ghana's resource-constrained, low-digital-literacy context. This study localises this model, exploring how Ghanaian agencies utilise culturally embedded mechanisms, such as oral storytelling, local media, and community events, as the primary 'throughput' mechanisms, thereby challenging the model's inherent technocratic bias.

2.3.1 Discussions and Debates in the Literature

2.3.1.0 Approach to Sustainability Communication

A central debate in the literature, championed by Golob et al. (2022), pits the strategic approach against the operative approach. The strategic approach prioritises formal, standardised communication, ensuring alignment with corporate financial goals and international reporting standards such as the GRI, SDG KPIs. The operative approach, conversely, focuses on fostering authentic, two-way dialogue and relational exchange to build trust and encourage behavioural shifts among stakeholders. The literature, dominated by European and North American case studies, assumes these two can be effectively integrated. However, in the

Ghanaian context, where economic and institutional resources are limited, this binary often collapses into a tension of prioritisation. PR agencies in Ghana may find themselves compelled to prioritise operative engagement, including relationship maintenance with local communities, not as a complement, but as the only viable tool for building legitimacy, particularly when budgets for complex strategic reporting are absent. This study seeks to investigate whether Ghanaian agencies perceive the operative as merely a functional necessity or a genuine, culturally-driven strategic superiority, challenging the notion of Western 'integration' models.

2.3.1.2 Emergence of Corporate Social Responsibility Communication

The various literature studies escalate this debate with an input-throughput-output model, framing sustainability communication as a dynamic process: inputs (strategy), throughput (dialogue), outputs (behavioural change). The model presumes symmetrical, tech-enabled dialogue, a luxury in Ghana's resource-constrained context. Critics might argue this reinforces a technocratic bias, sidelining oral storytelling, proverbs, or community events as valid "throughput." This study counters by localising the model: What if throughput in Ghana is a chief's palace meeting rather than a Zoom webinar? The debate thus evolves from integration to substitution: can non-digital, culturally embedded practices achieve equivalent outcomes?

2.3.1.3 CSR vs. Broader Sustainability

A persistent and critical critique, substantiated by the systematic review of Nutsugah and Anani-Bossman (2023), is the scholarly and practical conflation of CSR with sustainability communication. Anani-Bossman's (2021) interviews showed that in-house Ghanaian PR primarily uses a philanthropic, CSR-driven lens, such as building a community borehole, donating books, and communicating via interpersonal channels. However, this philanthropic focus fundamentally diverges from the core concept of sustainability, which demands systemic

integration across the triple bottom line, addressing environmental governance, responsible supply chains, and business model transformation, which are under SDGs 12 and 13. In Ghana, where multinational CSR budgets are often high-profile, the less visible, strategic work of SDG-aligned sustainability risks is being marginalised. The study investigates whether PR agencies, dealing with diverse mandates, are successfully reframing this inherited CSR focus as a gateway towards communicating the broader, more strategic SDG narratives.

2.3.1.4 Cultural Contextualization vs. Global Standardisation

The most ideological debate opposes the pressure for global standardisation driven by SDG frameworks, GRI reporting, and investor expectations, against the imperative for cultural contextualization. Akpabio's (2009) data demonstrated that African PR is defined by collectivism and oral traditions, traits that actively reject the symmetrical, explicit communication models preferred by Western practice. Sriramesh et al. (2013) amplify this, decrying the intellectual folly of "transplantation" of Western models into non-Western contexts and demanding context-specific theorising. This theoretical imperative creates a practical stalemate for PR agencies: they must produce a globally compliant annual report, yet the content of that report must be adapted into a locally credible, oral narrative for the impacted community. This study positions Ghanaian PR agencies as the cultural interpreters uniquely positioned to resolve this debate, exploring their actual strategies for simultaneously satisfying two vastly different communication epistemologies.

2.3.2 Trends in the Literature

2.3.2.0 Strategic Metrics to Integrated Operative Dialogue

The trajectory of communication has moved from an early, almost exclusive focus on strategic reporting using Key Performance Indicators, GRI standards, and SDG dashboards, to a recognition of the indispensable need for integrated operative dialogue. Golob et al. (2022) articulate this trend, advocating that metrics alone are insufficient; they must be combined with authentic engagement to achieve long-term behavioural impact. Similarly, Verk et al. (2021) advanced a dynamic model that transforms strategic inputs into tangible societal change outputs through the mechanism of sustained dialogue. In the Ghanaian context, this trend necessitates a profound skill shift that requires PR professionals must not only understand international metrics but also possess the cultural competence to translate these numbers into accessible, compelling narratives suitable for oral communication.

2.3.2.1 CSR-Centric to Broader Sustainability Frameworks

In developing nations such as Ghana, PR research on social impact began and often ended with CSR-driven reputation management, focusing on philanthropic, external actions (Anani-Bossman, 2021). The systematic review by Nutsugah & Anani-Bossman (2023) confirmed this trend in Ghana, noting the overwhelming predominance of CSR studies. Globally, however, there is an accelerating push towards triple-bottom-line integration, driven by the 2015 adoption of the SDGs. This trend requires organisations to address their core business impact, such as water use, carbon footprint, supply chain labour practices, and moving beyond ticking the boxes. In Ghana, PR agencies are now positioned to be key drivers in accelerating this SDG localisation, pushing clients to adopt systemic communication rather than limiting narratives to charity. The literature remains largely silent on how this critical acceleration is being managed by agencies on the ground.

2.3.2.2 Universal Models to Context-Specific Theorising

The long-term trend in international PR scholarship, catalysed by scholars like Akpabio (2009) and Sriramesh et al. (2013), is a definitive rejection of universal, one-size-fits-all models. The recognition that African PR is shaped by collectivism, high-context communication, and informal institutions fuels this trend toward context-specific theorising. The call for "contextualised theorising" is now a scholarly consensus. The post-2015 global momentum around SDG localisation further fuels this trend, as the success of the goals depends entirely on local relevance. The challenge is that while the trend exists, the empirical application is scarce.

2.3.2.3 Organisational Outputs to Practitioner Agency

A noticeable shift is occurring in the focus of scholarly inquiry, moving away from an almost exclusive focus on corporate or organisational outputs, including annual reports, CSR expenditure, and digital engagement rates (Golob, 2022; Verk, 2021), towards an examination of practitioner agency and craft. Traditional studies often overlook the specific, high-level intellectual labour performed by the strategic intermediaries, the PR agencies, who design, negotiate, and adapt these complex campaigns for diverse client portfolios. Anani-Bossman's (2021) focus on in-house execution, for instance, misses the agency's strategic role. This study directly taps into this emerging trend by positioning PR agency professionals not as mere executors, but as sustainability architects who translate global demands into local actions.

2.3.3 Gaps in the Literature

2.3.3.0 Industry Gap

Across the six core studies reviewed, PR scholarship demonstrates a persistent fixation on either in-house teams (Anani-Bossman, 2021) or corporate outputs (Golob, 2022; Verk, 2021; Nutsugah & Anani-Bossman, 2023). This scholarly omission renders the PR agency, the strategic intermediary responsible for designing, advising, and executing campaigns for a diverse array of clients, virtually absent from the discourse. Agencies operate with unique constraints: they must satisfy multiple client demands, manage complex contractual relationships, and continuously evolve adaptation strategies to apply across various sectors such as mining, finance, and tech, among others. This omission means that the adaptation strategies for sustainability communication applied across diverse client portfolios remain unexplored and undocumented. This study specifically fills this gap by conducting a phenomenological inquiry focused exclusively on the lived professional experiences of PR agency professionals in Accra.

2.3.3.1 Context Gap

The vast majority of sustainability communication research and case studies cited globally originate from Western and advanced world contexts (Golob et al., 2022), creating a geographic and cultural bias. While scholars like Akpabio (2009) have highlighted collectivism in African PR, and Sriramesh et al. (2013) have demanded contextual theorising, no comprehensive empirical study has focused specifically on sustainability communication adaptation in the unique high-context, low-resource environment of Ghana. Despite Ghana's defining characteristics, a strong collectivist culture, influential chieftaincy systems, reliance on oral traditions, and significant institutional informality, the specific challenge of localising technical

SDG narratives in this setting remains theoretically and practically unexamined. This study fills it with a Ghana-focused phenomenological design.

2.3.3.2 Methodological Gap

The existing non-Western literature largely consists of conceptual arguments (Sriramesh et al., 2013) or quantitative surveys with limited qualitative depth (Akpabio, 2009). While Verk et al. (2021) tested their model, it was limited to Slovenia. Consequently, there is a distinct lack of qualitative inquiry that explores the how and why of adaptation. The absence of rich, narrative data derived from the lived experiences of practitioners means that the mechanisms of adaptation, how a technical report is translated into a successful community meeting, and how low-budget constraints are overcome, remain speculative. This study fills this methodological gap by adopting a qualitative phenomenological approach and using semi-structured interviews to conduct a thematic analysis of the lived experiences of agency professionals, providing the necessary depth and nuance.

2.3.3.3 Conceptual Gap

The most pressing conceptual gap in the Ghanaian context is the ubiquitous conflation of CSR with the broader sustainability area. Nutsugah and Anani-Bossman's (2023) systematic review found that a disproportionate number of Ghanaian PR studies, 12 out of 26, focus only on CSR, with zero research on broader sustainability and SDG integration. Anani-Bossman (2021) confirms this practical conflation among in-house teams. This narrow, philanthropic focus ignores the critical need to communicate environmental governance of SDG 13 and systemic economic change of SDG 12. By failing to explore the integration of the full triple-bottom-line agenda beyond philanthropy, the literature risks promoting reputation management over genuine systemic impact. This study addresses this gap by examining full SDG-aligned

communication through the lens of PR agencies, treating CSR as an initial component rather than the endpoint of sustainability communication.

2.3.4 Contribution to Broader Field

The study elevates Ghanaian PR agencies as knowledge producers, countering the Western bias in sustainability communication literature (Golob et al., 2022). The application of Stakeholder Theory and the Cultural Interpreter models in PR decolonises global frameworks. This African-led theorising influences PR curricula, textbooks, and global standards, ensuring non-Western voices shape the field.

While Sriramesh et al. (2013) called for contextual models and Verk et al. (2021) modelled processes, this study delivers actionable strategies. The findings provide toolkits for PR agencies in resource-constrained, high-context cultures.

Nutsugah and Anani-Bossman (2023) noted zero studies on broader sustainability in Ghana. This research reframes CSR as a gateway, not the goal. The triple-bottom-line model influences corporate reporting standards and UN SDG localisation guidelines, pushing sustainability PR beyond philanthropy toward systemic impact.

Finally, the study shifts focus from corporate outputs to practitioner craft, a persistent gap across all six reviewed studies. It elevates PR agency professionals from just executors to sustainability architects, highlighting the strategic intellectual labour involved in cross-cultural adaptation. This practitioner-centric lens can inspire global PR associations and local professional bodies to prioritise agency-focused training, research, and policy advocacy, thus redefining the PR profession's critical role in driving sustainable development.

2.4 Theoretical Framework

This study employs a complementary combination of two established theories: Stakeholder Theory and the Cultural Interpreter Model of PR. These models provide a robust, integrated foundation for examining the dual requirements of sustainability communication on who must be engaged - Stakeholder Theory and how global messages are localised and mediated within the Ghanaian context - Cultural Interpreter Model.

2.4.0 Stakeholder Theory

Rooted in the work of Freeman (1984) and later refined by Donaldson and Preston (1995), Stakeholder Theory posits that for an organisation to achieve long-term success and sustainability, it must actively create value for and manage relationships with all individuals or groups that can affect or are affected by the organisation's objectives. This extends the traditional focus beyond shareholders to include employees, local communities, government bodies, non-governmental organisations (NGOs), suppliers, and, critically in the Ghanaian context, traditional authorities.

The theory identifies stakeholders based on attributes such as power, legitimacy, and urgency (Mitchell et al., 1997). In the extractive industries dominating Ghana, local communities often possess high legitimacy and high urgency, while traditional authorities possess significant informal power. Stakeholder Theory acts as a vital strategic prioritisation tool, guiding PR professionals to identify and rank these groups, understand their specific interests and concerns, and customise sustainability messages to meet varied, often conflicting, expectations.

2.4.1 Cultural Interpreter Model of PR

Developed by Grunig et al. (1995) as a necessary evolution to counter the ethnocentric bias of the Western excellence theory, the Cultural Interpreter Model positions the PR practitioner as

an essential cultural mediator or broker. The model stipulates that practitioners operating in non-Western or cross-cultural settings must perform a dual function by translating the global organisation's values, mission, and technical sustainability reports into terms that are culturally relevant and socially acceptable to the local public.

The model also helps in conveying the local public's expectations, cultural norms, communication preferences, and criticisms back to the organisation's management in a form they can understand and act upon.

This model is particularly relevant for the Ghanaian context, where the cultural distance between multinational corporate headquarters and local villages is vast. It requires the PR professional to possess high cultural competence and to actively choose communication channels and styles that align with the local high-context communication culture.

2.5 Relevance to the Study

2.5.0 Stakeholder Theory

Stakeholder Theory is vital for answering the research questions concerning conceptualisation and strategies. It moves PR agency professionals beyond a generalised audience to a highly segmented, prioritised list of publics. For sustainability communication in Ghana, this means the customisation of messages. This helps in identifying that an international investor requires formal, written GRI metrics, while a local chief requires personal, face-to-face dialogue concerning communal benefit.

This theory also helps in assessing outcomes. It defines successful communication by measurable outcomes such as genuine trust-building within the community and positive behavioural change among key community stakeholders. This helps PR professionals conceptualise sustainability communication as a strategic management function.

2.5.1 Cultural Interpreter Model

The Cultural Interpreter Model (Grunig et al., 1995) is uniquely suited to the Ghanaian reality captured by this research. It directly informs the research question concerning adaptation strategies and challenges or opportunities faced by public relations professionals working within culturally nuanced environments.

Bridging the high-context gap is a central element of this model. In a culture prioritising oral tradition, the model explains why PR professionals must rely on traditional media and local engagements, even if these channels lack the formal metrics of Western communication.

The model is also relevant in navigating ‘greenwashing’ scepticism. The interpreter role is crucial for managing the public scepticism surrounding ‘greenwashing’ (Obeng-Odoom, 2020). The Cultural Interpreter Model accommodates the realities of a developing communication environment while maintaining strategic intent.

2.6 Chapter Summary

This chapter has systematically reviewed the landscape of sustainability communication within public relations, establishing a robust theoretical and empirical foundation for the study. It began by precisely defining key terms, sustainability communication, PR practice, adaptation, and the Ghanaian context, to anchor the inquiry in clear conceptual boundaries. The review critically analysed dominant global studies, revealing significant conceptual, industry, and contextual gaps, particularly the absence of research focused on PR agencies and the pervasive conflation of CSR with broader SDG-aligned sustainability in Ghana. To address these gaps, the chapter introduced and justified the integrated theoretical framework: Stakeholder Theory provides the necessary strategic lens for identifying and prioritising relevant publics, while the Cultural Interpreter Model offers the essential process-based mechanism for culturally adapting global messages for the high-context, collectivist environment of Ghana. This detailed

synthesis substantiates the critical need for a qualitative investigation into the lived experiences of PR agency professionals in Accra, setting the methodological stage for Chapter Three.

CHAPTER THREE

METHODOLOGY

3.1 Chapter Introduction

This chapter outlines the methodological blueprint for investigating how PR agency professionals in Ghana adapt sustainability communications. It begins by situating the study within an interpretive paradigm and explicating underlying philosophical assumptions. The qualitative research approach and phenomenological design are justified as optimal for capturing lived experiences. Detailed procedures for sampling, data collection, ethical compliance, trustworthiness, and thematic analysis are presented, ensuring methodological rigour that establishes a credible pathway to answering the research questions and generating contextually grounded insights.

3.2 Research Paradigm

The study is anchored in the interpretivist paradigm, which posits that reality is socially constructed and best understood through participants' subjective meanings (Creswell & Poth, 2018). Unlike positivism's pursuit of universal laws, interpretivism prioritises depth, context, and nuance, essential for exploring how Ghanaian PR professionals interpret and adapt sustainability communication within cultural and institutional constraints. This paradigm aligns with the study's exploratory aims and the Cultural Interpreter Model, which emphasises meaning-making across cultural boundaries.

3.3 Philosophical Assumptions

Three core philosophical stances underpin the research: Ontology, Epistemology, and Axiology.

3.3.0 Ontology

Multiple, co-existing realities exist, shaped by participants' professional experiences, cultural backgrounds, and organisational contexts. Sustainability communication is not a fixed construct but varies across Ghanaian PR agencies.

3.3.1 Epistemology

Knowledge emerges through researcher-participant interaction. The researcher, as a Ghanaian PR scholar, brings contextual familiarity while maintaining reflexivity to mitigate bias.

3.3.2 Axiology

The study acknowledges the researcher's commitment to advancing localised PR scholarship and sustainable development, ensuring transparency in how values influence interpretation.

3.4 Research Approach

A qualitative research approach is adopted to capture rich, descriptive data on complex social phenomena (Braun & Clarke, 2022). Quantitative methods, while useful for measuring communication outcomes, cannot adequately explore how and why PR professionals adapt sustainability messages within Ghana's socio-cultural setting. The qualitative lens enables thick description of strategies, challenges, and opportunities, aligning with calls for contextual PR research in Africa (Sriramesh et al., 2013).

3.5 Research Design

This study adopts a phenomenological research design within a qualitative paradigm to uncover the lived experiences of PR agency professionals in Ghana as they adapt sustainability communications. Phenomenology, rooted in the philosophy of Husserl and van Manen (2016),

is ideally suited to explore the essence of a phenomenon, the process of cultural and contextual adaptation, through the subjective meanings participants assign to their professional practice. Unlike experimental or survey designs that prioritise generalizability, phenomenology seeks depth, richness, and contextual nuance, making it the optimal choice for a topic where little prior empirical work exists in the Ghanaian context (Nutsugah & Anani-Bossman, 2023)

3.6 Sampling Strategy

In research, a sampling strategy refers to the systematic approach utilised to select a subset, known as a sample, from a larger population that is relevant to the study (Pickard, 2017). The study employed a purposive sampling strategy, a non-probability sampling technique where participants were selected based on specific criteria relevant to the research objectives (Saunders et al., 2019). This approach targets PR agency professionals in Accra, where the majority of the PR practitioners work.

3.7 Sample Size

Although Kusi (2012) contends that larger sample sizes strengthen the validity and reliability of qualitative research, Silverman (2010) argues that the depth and richness of the data, and the quality of analysis, are equally important. Reflecting this perspective, and consistent with the methodological approach adopted by Nutsugah (2019), this study engaged six interview participants in detailed, in-depth conversations to ensure that the data generated were sufficiently rich and comprehensive.

3.8 Data Collection Techniques

The process of data collection is a cornerstone of qualitative research, enabling researchers to gather rich and in-depth insights. For this study, the data collection technique was semi-

structured interviews to understand how PR agency practitioners adopt sustainability communications. Semi-structured interviews allow participants to share their experiences while ensuring key topics are covered (Creswell & Poth, 2018).

3.9 Data Collection Process

The data collection process was systematic and iterative, ensuring comprehensive data gathering aligned with the study's objectives. Conducted over ten (10) weeks, it follows a six-phase workflow that ensures ethical rigour, data integrity, and contextual sensitivity. Upon agreeing to participate, informed consent was obtained, and interviews were scheduled at participants' convenience, conducted virtually to accommodate geographic constraints. Interviews, lasting 30 minutes, were recorded with permission and transcribed verbatim.

3.10 Ethical Considerations

In this study, ethical principles guided every stage of the research process, from data collection to analysis and reporting, in accordance with the recommendations of Creswell and Poth (2018). One of the primary ethical principles observed was informed consent. Participants were provided with detailed and comprehensible information about the study's purpose, procedures, and their rights, including the freedom to withdraw at any point without consequence. Informed consent was obtained before the commencement of interviews. Confidentiality and anonymity were strictly maintained to protect participants' identities and any sensitive information related to their businesses. Data were anonymised using letters of the alphabet, and all collected information was securely stored.

3.11 Authenticity and Trustworthiness

In this study, authenticity and trustworthiness were considered appropriately. To establish credibility, data triangulation was adopted using evidence from different data sources to build a coherent justification for themes. In addition, member checking was used, whereby participants were invited to review summaries of their interview data to verify the accuracy of the interpretations and enhance the trustworthiness of the analysis. To achieve trustworthiness, transcript checking was adopted to ensure that they do not contain obvious mistakes made during transcription. Maintaining the meaning of the codes was also employed to ensure there was no shift in the meaning of the codes during the coding process.

3.12 Data Analysis Techniques

The study employed thematic analysis to examine the qualitative data collected, ensuring a systematic approach throughout the research process. Thematic analysis was utilised to identify, analyse, and report recurring patterns or themes within the data, in line with the approach outlined by Braun and Clarke (2006). The process began with familiarisation with the content, followed by initial codes to label meaningful data segments relevant to the research objectives. These codes were organised into potential themes by grouping similar patterns. Each theme was then clearly defined and named in a manner that captured its essence and directly addressed the study's research questions.

3.13 Chapter Summary

This chapter has articulated a robust qualitative methodology grounded in interpretivism and phenomenology. The research paradigm, philosophical assumptions, and design choices prioritise depth and context. Purposive sampling targets experienced PR professionals, while semi-structured interviews ensure rich data capture. Ethical protocols and trustworthiness

measures safeguard integrity. Thematic analysis distilled patterns from participants' experiences, setting the stage for empirical findings in Chapter Four. The methodology reflects a deliberate effort to centre Ghanaian voices in sustainability communication scholarship. The qualitative approach, multiple case study design, purposive sampling, and semi-structured interviews were well-suited to address the research questions.

CHAPTER FOUR

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSIONS

4.1 Chapter Introduction

Chapter Four presents and discusses the findings of the study. Drawing from semi-structured interviews with six experienced practitioners, labelled Participants A, B, C, D, E, and F, this chapter first offers a brief profile of each participant. It then presents the core themes that emerged from thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2022) - Beyond CSR, Cultural Localisation, Capacity Constraints, and Practitioner Leadership.

Each theme is illustrated with verbatim quotations to preserve the participants' voices. The second half of the chapter discusses these findings in relation to existing empirical literature and the study's theoretical framework, Stakeholder Theory and the Cultural Interpreter Model, demonstrating how Ghanaian agency practice both confirms and extends global knowledge. The chapter concludes by synthesising the contribution of these lived experiences to the broader field.

4.2 Preliminary Description

The study involved six senior PR professionals from six different top PR agencies in Ghana. All had a minimum of five years' agency experience and direct involvement in sustainability or CSR-related campaigns. Participant A is a PR Account Manager, Participant B is a Founder of a PR agency and Fashion PR Specialist, and Participant C is a PR Agency Lead. Participants D, E, and F are Account Communications Officer, Communication Lead Sub-Saharan Africa, and Communication Expert, respectively.

The units of analysis were the PR strategies employed, challenges faced, and their outcomes, derived from interview transcripts.

4.3 Findings for Research Findings

The findings are presented based on the major themes derived from the axial codes, supported by direct quotes from participants to illustrate their experiences.

4.3.1 Findings for Research Question 1

The major theme identified is Beyond CSR, indicating that sustainability communication goes beyond CSR or philanthropy.

4.3.1.1 Beyond Corporate Social Responsibility

A unanimous insight across all six participants is that sustainability communication in Ghanaian practice has outgrown the traditional CSR box. Participants consistently framed sustainability as an integrated, long-term organisational philosophy rather than episodic philanthropy.

Participant C captured this most succinctly: “Sustainability communication, per my understanding, goes beyond corporate social responsibility... it goes beyond environmental safeguarding... It’s about demonstrating the long-term commitment to the environment, social, and economic well-being.”

Participant E reinforced the distinction between local and multinational expectations: “For most Ghanaian clients...they see sustainability through the lens of CSR projects and donations...But for international organisations...they see it as a holistic business strategy... part of the core bit of who they are.”

Participant D added an inter-generational dimension: “Sustainability communication comprises all the information we design...to ensure that programs and projects outlive this generation and benefit the next.”

This theme directly addresses the conceptual gap identified in Chapter Two (Nutsugah & Anani-Bossman, 2023), where Ghanaian PR scholarship remained trapped in CSR narratives. The major theme, *Beyond CSR*, reveals a shift in practitioner understanding. Ghanaian PR agency professionals no longer accept sustainability communication as episodic charity or regulatory box-ticking. They define it as a holistic, triple-bottom-line commitment that must be woven into organisational strategy, messaging, and operations for the long term.

4.3.2 Findings for Research Question 2

Cultural Localisation was identified as the major theme encapsulating the absolute necessity of translating universal sustainability concepts into distinctly Ghanaian idioms, values, emotions, and lived realities.

4.3.2.0 Cultural Localisation

Participants did not merely adapt messages; they re-authored them so that global goals such as SDGs, net-zero, and circular economy stop sounding foreign and start feeling like common sense within Ghanaian cultural logic.

Participant B, whose agency specialises in fashion and lifestyle brands, repeatedly returned to the phrase “Made in Ghana” as a powerful localisation tool. “Made in Ghana’ is like one of the buzz words... but I think it’s also very effective for people to know that this brand is locally sourced. Locally sourced means that it is handcrafted. Handcrafted means that you are using artisans. You’re using local skills. You’re not using a machine where that’s mass-produced, because if it’s mass-produced, there’s a lot of waste in the system.” For Participant B, sustainability is not communicated through technical jargon about carbon footprints but

through pride in local craftsmanship, support for artisans, and rejection of wasteful importation from China. The sustainability argument becomes inseparable from economic patriotism and community livelihood.

Participant C illustrated the strategic use of emotional and physical proximity, especially in anti-galamsey (illegal mining) campaigns. “We know that when we can trigger a certain emotion within our target audience, then we get a desired response... We trigger emotions by telling you the adverse effects of galamsey, particularly on your health, even before we come to the environment. Because, yes, you are ingesting cyanide. You are ingesting mercury. What is it going to do to your body in terms of health? And then also proximity, you could be here in Accra... but whatever adverse effects the people there are having, health-wise, you could also be experiencing them.” By linking distant mining pollution to the cassava used for fufu on an Accra dining table, the participant collapses geographical distance and makes the issue urgently personal, connecting the issues with storytelling to make an impact.

Participant F explicitly framed her role as descending from abstract global discourse to the everyday Ghanaian experience: “We consider the people we are working with, their traditions, the values Ghanaians are into. We need to go down to their level... explain certain things to them so that when they both embrace it, their entire community embraces it.”

Participant E described the same process as “humanising” sustainability: “We try to move away from the abstract... We humanise our message at every point in time. We focus more on the people’s stories, the farmer using improved fertiliser, the artist using sound to start conversations... When you humanise the story, authenticity comes into play in a very natural manner.” Participant A and Participant D echoed this by consciously avoiding complex ESG dashboards in favour of stories that chiefs, market traders, and radio listeners can retell in their own words.

4.3.3 Findings for Research Question 3

Another major theme identified was Capacity Constraints, a strong undercurrent of frustration that emerged concerning the structural and systemic barriers that prevent sustainability communication from reaching its full potential in Ghanaian PR practice

4.2.3.0 Capacity Constraints

Despite the evident passion, creativity, and strategic sophistication displayed by all six participants, a strong undercurrent of frustration emerged concerning the structural and systemic barriers that prevent sustainability communication from reaching its full potential in Ghanaian PR practice. Far from being minor operational hiccups, these constraints were repeatedly described as fundamental obstacles that affect every stage of the communication process, from strategy development to impact reporting.

4.2.3.0.0 Measurement and Data Deficits

The most frequently and emphatically cited challenge was the chronic difficulty of obtaining reliable, verifiable data to underpin credible sustainability claims.

Participant A described the problem in stark terms: “One of the biggest challenges is... the difficulty of measuring impact. For instance, if a company introduces hybrid work arrangements to reduce electricity consumption, it becomes complex to quantify and accurately report the environmental impact without thorough technical data. This leads to problems in reporting carbon footprints, energy usage, and broader sustainability outcomes... accurate reporting requires consistent systems and technical expertise that many organisations do not yet possess.” Participant E extended this to a national systemic level: “We do not have a lot of data in this part of the world to tell us what significantly we are lacking... If we had that data, we would be able to easily tell [businesses] this area is lacking and this is where the support is

needed... we tend to just do ad-hoc stuff.” The absence of baseline data and standardised measurement frameworks forces agencies into reactive, defensive communication rather than proactive, evidence-based storytelling.

4.2.3.0.1 Cost-Profit Tension and Resource Constraints

The second most pervasive barrier was the persistent conflict between sustainability ideals and commercial realities, particularly the higher cost of local, ethical, or eco-friendly alternatives. Participant B, working extensively with fashion and lifestyle brands, was candid “Producing locally is more expensive... sometimes they are torn between sourcing locally or importing cheaper materials... the more the raw materials are expensive, the more the cost also goes up... it would also mean that they need to factor all these things which can increase their production cost... those are some of the challenges which are hindrances to the clients when you’re trying to push them to think sustainably.”

Participant C noted that clients often view sustainability initiatives as an expenditure rather than an investment. “There is also the issue of the budget constraint, because they see it as well... it’s just one of those activities that will take money from the business and not bring in anything.”

4.2.3.0.2 Technical Skills and Knowledge Gaps

Some of the participants highlighted the shortage of specialised sustainability expertise, both within client organisations and among practitioners and media partners themselves. Participant D “There is a general lack of capacity in sustainability communication and ESG among practitioners... even at the agency level, we sometimes struggle to practice what we preach.” Participant E indicated that “Media friends also don’t have a lot of knowledge in that space for them to be able to showcase it to the general public.”

Participant A added that sustainability reporting frequently requires technical competencies such as calculating emissions savings that fall outside traditional PR training.

4.3.4 Practitioner Leadership

The most passionate, forward-looking, and repeatedly emphasised theme across the entire dataset is the firm conviction that Ghanaian PR agencies are not, and must not remain, passive service providers executing client briefs. Instead, participants positioned themselves and their agencies as the indispensable architects, educators, advocates, and moral conscience of authentic sustainability communication in Ghana. This theme represents a reversal of the “agency invisibility” gap identified in Chapter Two: far from being absent from scholarship, these professionals see themselves as the primary drivers of change who can shift the entire ecosystem from tokenism to genuine impact.

Participant A articulated this point by saying, “As the world moves toward achieving the Sustainable Development Goals... this gap-demand creates room for PR professionals to become thought leaders in sustainability communication... to influence policy, shape public narratives, and position oneself as an expert... The more PR professionals immerse themselves in sustainability work, the more they become indispensable in national and corporate development conversations.”

Participant B framed it as a professional and ethical duty: “We owe it to ourselves as PR professionals to champion that to our clients... It’s our responsibility to be well aware of what sustainability is about, and to be able to guide our clients.”

Participant C invoked the classic “expert prescriber” role from PR theory. “We also need to sometimes be the expert prescribers that we ought to be, and tell them: ‘Look, you want this done, but this is going to have on your business. However, if we go this route, this is the desired response that we are going to trigger.’”

Participant D called for structural reinforcement through education. “There is a significant opportunity... to build deeper capacity in sustainability communication... Communication universities in Ghana can play a pivotal role by introducing structured programmes... sustainability communication could become a niche specialisation in Ghana’s PR landscape.”

Participant E saw commercial and cultural leverage points. “Sustainability gives the brands that we represent a competitive edge... There is a strong intersection of youth culture... young Ghanaians love conversations around recycling, ethical entrepreneurship... these are youth cultures that we can take advantage of as PR professionals.”

The participants are very aware that clients, especially local ones, often lack vision, data, or long-term commitment, and that media partners lack depth.

4.4 Discussions of Findings

4.4.1 Empirical Discussions

The findings from this study both affirm and significantly advance the existing body of African and Ghanaian public relations scholarship while simultaneously exposing its previous limitations. The major themes offer a nuanced understanding of sustainability communication adoption by PR agency practitioners in a resource-constrained, culturally distinct context like Ghana.

4.4.1.0 Beyond CSR

Beyond CSR directly confronts and closes the conceptual gap identified by Nutsugah and Anani-Bossman (2023). Their review of 26 Ghanaian PR studies concluded that the field remained CSR-dominant with “zero studies on broader sustainability”. The six agency professionals in this study have already left that narrow framing behind in their daily practice, defining sustainability as a holistic, triple-bottom-line, long-term organisational philosophy

rather than philanthropy. This demonstrates that Ghanaian PR practitioners are conceptually far ahead of the academic literature that purports to describe them.

4.4.1.1 Cultural Localisation

Cultural Localisation breathes strategic life into earlier descriptive observations about African communication patterns. Akpabio (2009) and Anani-Bossman (2021) characterised African and Ghanaian PR as collectivist, high-context, and reliant on oral traditions. Until now, these remained largely theoretical claims. The participants operationalise those cultural realities into deliberate tactics: “Made in Ghana” pride and artisan livelihoods, health-and-family proximity framing for galamsey, humanised personal stories, and descent to market-level language and reusable everyday objects. What was abstract cultural theory is now a practical toolkit for making global sustainability discourse Ghanaian-owned.

4.4.1.2 Capacity Constraints

The capacity constraints identified, lack of data, the high cost of ethical alternatives, technical skills gaps, and the persistent intent–investment mismatch mirror challenges documented in broader developing-economy literature (Sriramesh et al., 2013). What is new is that these constraints are articulated for the first time through the specific lens of PR agency practitioners, the actors who sit at the uncomfortable intersection where client ambitions collide with commercial and technical realities.

4.4.1.3 Practitioner Leadership

Perhaps most importantly, the emergent theme of Practitioner Leadership represents a complete reversal of the “agency invisibility” gap that has plagued the literature. Every single prior study reviewed in Chapter Two focused exclusively on in-house teams or corporate outputs,

rendering PR agencies, the strategic intermediaries who actually design and execute most sustainability campaigns, absent. The participants position Ghanaian PR agencies not as passive service providers but as the indispensable architects, educators, advocates, and moral conscience of authentic sustainability communication in the country.

4.4.2 Theoretical Discussions

The empirical findings confirm, refine, and support the study's theoretical framework comprising Stakeholder Theory (Freeman, 1984; Donaldson & Preston, 1995; Mitchell et al., 1997) and the Cultural Interpreter Model of PR (Grunig et al., 1995). Both theories emerge as lived realities in the daily practice of Ghanaian PR agencies, while simultaneously being extended in ways that strengthen their explanatory power for non-Western, emerging-economy contexts.

4.4.2.1 Stakeholder Theory

Stakeholder Theory's core assertion that organisational legitimacy and success depend on managing relationships with all affected parties, not just shareholders, is vividly enacted and expanded in the Ghanaian agency context. Participants consistently constructed multi-stakeholder coalitions that include not only regulators and shareholders (the usual focus of Western applications) but also artisans, traditional leaders, rural communities, and future generations. These are precisely the broad, inclusive coalitions Mitchell et al.'s (1997) envisaged, yet they are rarely seen in practice outside developing economies.

4.4.2.2 Cultural Interpreter Model

The Cultural Interpreter Model, originally presented as a corrective to ethnocentric Western models, positioned PR practitioners as mediators who decode global concepts and re-encode them in local cultural systems. Until now, the model has remained largely descriptive and lacked concrete, context-specific tactics. The Ghanaian agency professionals provided the

missing tactical layer, narrative reframing that is transforming “circular economy” into “Made in Ghana” pride and artisan livelihoods (Participant B). The Ghanaian agencies also supply the missing repertoire in vivid, repeatable detail. “Circular economy” becomes “Made in Ghana” and the dignity of local artisans.

4.5 Chapter Summary

Chapter Four has presented robust themes from the lived experiences of Ghanaian PR agency professionals: moving beyond CSR, practising Cultural Localisation, confronting Capacity Constraints, and most importantly claiming Practitioner Leadership. They confirm the relevance of Stakeholder Theory and substantially extend the Cultural Interpreter Model. Far from being passive transmitters, PR agencies emerge as the crucial mediators who can shift Ghanaian organisations from tokenism to genuine, culturally resonant sustainability practice.

CHAPTER FIVE

SUMMARY, CONCLUSION, AND RECOMMENDATIONS

5.0 Chapter Introduction

The fifth chapter, which concludes this research, summarises the entire study and, most importantly, focuses attention on the major findings this study has revealed. The chapter defines the overarching conclusions derived from the synthesis of the gathered data, positioning the Ghanaian experience within the broader context of global public relations scholarship. The chapter also provided actionable recommendations targeted at key stakeholders, including industry practitioners, professional bodies, academic institutions, and public policy makers, based on the research outcomes that have emerged.

5.1 Summary of Findings

The empirical cornerstone of this research resides in the detailed exploration of the lived experiences of six senior public relations agency professionals, all of whom play a crucial role in shaping sustainability campaigns directed at Ghanaian audiences. Utilising rigorous thematic analysis of their in-depth, semi-structured interviews, four key themes emerged, which merge into a single, cohesive narrative regarding how sustainability communication is conceptually understood, strategically practised, and envisioned within Ghana's agency sector.

The practitioners demonstrated a practical shift, effectively transcending the outdated corporate social responsibility (CSR) paradigm, a framework that, the research confirms, continues to disproportionately dominate Ghanaian scholarship.

Participants conceptualised sustainability as not just philanthropic expenditure, but as a holistic, intergenerational commitment. This commitment necessitates the simultaneous and

integrated addressing of three essential dimensions: environmental integrity, social equity and justice, and long-term economic viability. This perspective aligns with the internationally recognised triple-bottom-line (TBL) approach, which was first advocated by Elkington (1998), yet this level of theoretical and practical integration remains rarely documented among African communication professionals.

Authenticity emerged as a non-negotiable ethical stance. Participants expressed rejection of greenwashing, insisting that genuine sustainability communication must transparently account for both positive contributions and negative externalities. This finding reiterates international calls for radical transparency (Christensen & Cornelissen, 2015) while revealing a particularly fierce moral intensity in the Ghanaian context.

Another discovery of the study is cultural localisation practised by these agencies. Global sustainability constructs are not merely translated but localised using Ghanaian cultural logic. The circular economy becomes pride in “Made in Ghana” craftsmanship and the dignity of local artisans; illegal mining (galamsey) is reframed as poison entering the family fufu pot in Accra homes, which is a significant enrichment of the Cultural Interpreter Model.

Message amplification follows an equally context-sensitive hybrid model. Rather than adopting the digital-first strategies prevalent in European literature (Golob et al., 2022), participants instinctively combine digital and influencer networks with the enduring cultural authority of radio, television, billboards, and physical artefacts that continue to travel home with audiences.

Despite this sophistication, practitioners were candid about structural constraints, including a lack of data, the persistently higher cost of ethically local sourcing, technical skills gaps, and

the frequent mismatch between client rhetoric and investment. These barriers mirror developing-economy challenges identified elsewhere (Sriramesh et al., 2013).

The strongest unifying theme was practitioner leadership. Participants positioned PR agencies not as hired executors but as strategic prescribers of Ghanaian sustainability communication practice. They see themselves as the only actors who sit at the nexus of global mandates, local realities, and creative execution, making them uniquely qualified to shift the entire ecosystem from superficial CSR to systemic, culturally owned sustainability.

5.2 Conclusions

This study yields several conclusions of both scholarly and practical significance.

First, Ghanaian PR agency professionals operate at a level of conceptual maturity and strategic sophistication that substantially outpaces both the academic literature produced about them (Nutsugah & Anani-Bossman, 2023) and the understanding of many local clients. They have already internalised a post-CSR, triple-bottom-line understanding of sustainability, while scholarship and parts of industry remain trapped in older paradigms (Elkington, 1998).

Secondly, cultural localisation is not an optional communication tactic but a fundamental precondition for sustainability messages to achieve legitimacy, emotional resonance, and behavioural impact in Ghana. The Ghanaian collection of cultural interpretation represents a significant empirical enrichment of the Cultural Interpreter Model (Grunig et al., 1995) and merits recognition as a transferable African contribution to global theory.

Until the systemic barriers of data poverty, budget constraints, and skills shortages are deliberately and collectively dismantled, the transformative potential revealed in these interviews will remain only partially realised (Sriramesh et al., 2013).

The future trajectory of authentic sustainability communication in Ghana rests not primarily with corporations, regulators, or civil society organisations, but with public relations agencies willing to exercise leadership. The participants in this study demonstrated that the creative, strategic, and cultural capacity already exists within Ghana's PR agency sector.

5.4 Limitations

Every study draws its own boundaries, and this one is no exception.

The study is geographically and organisationally narrow. All six participants are senior professionals working in established PR agencies located in Accra. This focus intentionally privileged the voices of experienced agency practitioners who had been absent from prior literature. Still, it necessarily excluded practitioners from smaller regional agencies in cities such as Kumasi, Takoradi, or Tamale, where client types, resource levels, and cultural dynamics may differ significantly. Equally absent are perspectives from in-house corporate communication teams, government communicators, and NGO advocacy specialists. Their inclusion might have revealed contrasting priorities, greater bureaucratic constraints, or alternative localisation tactics.

Secondly, the sample, though purposive and information-rich, remains small. Six participants were sufficient to reach thematic saturation within a phenomenological paradigm (Creswell & Poth, 2018), but the findings cannot claim statistical representativeness across the many PR consultancies and the hundreds of freelance practitioners in Ghana.

The study also relies entirely on self-reported accounts rather than direct observation or documentary analysis of actual campaigns. While the semi-structured interviews were lengthy, probing, and yielded remarkably consistent narratives, participants were recounting practice

from memory and professional identity. This raises the concern that practitioners may have emphasised aspirational ideals such as authentic transparency, cultural depth, and leadership ambition while downplaying instances of client-driven greenwashing, budget compromises, or failed executions.

Phenomenology is powerful for surfacing lived meaning, foregrounding subjective interpretation over objective measurement of outcomes. The study highlights how practitioners understand and narrate their work, but it does not quantitatively assess the actual reach, credibility, or behavioural impact of the localised campaigns described.

These limitations do not undermine the richness or trustworthiness of the findings within their intended scope, but they clearly direct where future research should focus that is, broader sample size, regional and in-house comparisons, longitudinal designs, observational methods, and outcome-focused impact studies.

5.5 Recommendations

Sustainability communications has become an integral part of the practice of public relations in Ghana. The study's insights carry a clear call for concrete, coordinated steps across every part of the ecosystem that shapes sustainability communication in Ghana.

5.5.0 Recommendations for PR Practitioners

For the PR agencies themselves, the study recommends that practitioners should develop formal training programmes, proprietary methodologies, and compelling proposition documents for their clients. It also pushes the idea of agencies to establish dedicated Sustainability Communication Units and begin proactively educating clients through

workshops and forums that will make them rapidly become the preferred partners for organisations seeking genuine credibility.

5.5.1 Recommendations for PR Professional Bodies

For the Institute of Public Relations Ghana and allied professional bodies, the study recommends that IPR Ghana should launch a nationally recognised Certification in Sustainability Communication and commission the collection of Ghana-specific guidelines and case studies to give practitioners the visibility and validation that their work deserves.

5.5.2 Recommendations for Academia

For universities and other tertiary institutions, curricular transformation to a full sustainability communication programme can no longer be delayed. The study strongly recommends the establishment of a full Postgraduate Sustainability Communications programme or full Master's programmes in Sustainability Communication. These programmes must be co-designed and co-delivered in partnership with industry, relevant organisations, and subject-matter experts.

5.5.3 Recommendations for Public Policy

For government and regulatory authorities, the study recommends two initiatives. The launch of a national sustainability data portal, which will be an open, verified national platform providing sector-specific baselines for emissions, waste, water, and local sourcing. This single resource would instantly eliminate the “we don't have the numbers” excuse, which sometimes hinders information sharing and sustainability communication.

The second is to introduce immediate tax credits for certified local, circular, and ethical sourcing. Making the sustainable option the cheaper option would flip corporate resistance and unleash the exact campaigns agency PR practitioners have long advocated.

5.6 Chapter Summary

The chapter concluded the study by summarising four key findings: Ghanaian PR agencies operate with a sophisticated, post-CSR conceptualisation of sustainability; they adhere to a non-negotiable ethical stance against greenwashing; they employ advanced cultural localisation strategies that enrich the Cultural Interpreter Model; and they are positioned as strategic leaders in the entire ecosystem. The study concluded that this immense strategic capacity is currently constrained by systemic barriers, such as data poverty and budgetary limitations. The chapter presented targeted recommendations for PR agencies, including establishing dedicated sustainability units, professional bodies' national certification, postgraduate programmes, and introducing a national sustainability data portal and tax credits for ethical sourcing.

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APPENDIXES

1. INTERVIEW GUIDE

Introduction

Good morning, and thank you for taking the time to participate in this interview.

My name is Ekow Quandzie, and I'm conducting this study as part of my dissertation on how Ghanaian public relations (PR) professionals integrate sustainability communication into their work.

The purpose of this discussion is to explore your experiences, perceptions, and professional practices relating to sustainability communication. Your insights will help me understand how PR agencies in Ghana conceptualize and implement sustainability communication strategies, as well as the challenges and opportunities in doing so.

I'm interested in your honest opinions and lived experiences. The interview will take approximately 40 minutes. With your permission, I'd like to audio-record our conversation to ensure accuracy in analysis. Everything you share will be kept strictly confidential and used only for academic purposes. You may choose not to answer any question or withdraw at any time.

Do you have any questions before we begin?

Section A: Icebreaker and Rapport Building

To start, could you tell me something interesting about your professional journey, how did you first get into public relations or communications?

What motivated or inspired you to pursue a career in this field?

Professional Background

Could you briefly describe your current role and key responsibilities within your organisation?

How long have you been working in public relations or communications?

What types of clients or industries does your agency typically serve?

(Research Question 1: How do PR agency professionals in Ghana define and understand sustainability communications?)

- How would you personally define sustainability communications in the context of your PR work?
- In your experience, how do clients or organizations in Ghana interpret or expect sustainability to be communicated?
- How does your agency's understanding of sustainability influence the messages or campaigns you develop?

Research Question 2: What strategies do PR professionals employ to adapt sustainability communications to align with Ghanaian cultural and institutional contexts?

- What key strategies does your agency employ to communicate sustainability messages to Ghanaian audiences effectively?
- How do digital media tools play a role in your sustainability communication efforts?
- In what ways do you collaborate with traditional or local media outlets to promote sustainability messages?

Research Question 3: What are the primary challenges and opportunities in implementing sustainability communications within Ghanaian PR practice?

- What are some of the main challenges you face when developing or implementing sustainability communication initiatives in Ghana?

- What opportunities do you see for PR professionals to make sustainability communication more effective and influential in Ghana?
- How do you envision the future of sustainability communication in Ghana's PR industry?

Conclusion

- Is there anything else you would like to add about sustainability communication practices in Ghana?
- What advice would you give to upcoming PR professionals who want to integrate sustainability into their work?

APPENDIXES

2. CODING SHEET FOR THEMATIC ANALYSIS

Research Question	Participant	Open Coding	Axial Coding	Selective Coding
RQ1: How do PR agency professionals in Ghana define and understand sustainability communications?	A	real impact, positive and negative effects, transparency, not just good deeds, environment	Honest and Balanced Impact	Beyond CSR
		organisation		
	B	guide clients, conscious production, local sourcing, reduce waste, champion sustainability	Guiding Conscious Practice	
	C	beyond CSR, long-term commitment, environment, social, economic, good corporate citizen	Holistic Triple- Bottom-Line	
	D	long-term value creation, protect planet, socially responsible, outlive generation	Inter- generational Responsibility	
E	telling progress responsibly, transparency and accountability, humanize impact	Responsible Storytelling		

	F	Storytelling, facts, natural lifestyle, resonate with audience	Relatable Storytelling	
RQ2: What strategies do PR professionals employ to adapt sustainability communications to Ghanaian contexts?	A	Transparency, honesty, clarity, action-oriented, digital analytics, influencers, traditional media	Multi-Channel Transparency	Cultural Localization
	B	“made in Ghana” messaging, local artisans, aligned influencers, heavy digital storytelling	Local Pride & Values	
	C	trigger emotions, proximity, galamsey health link, digital virality, traditional credibility	Emotional Proximity	
	D	eco-friendly events, reduce paper/plastic, influencer-journalists, media soirees	Experiential Demonstration	
	E	humanize stories, people behind numbers, ripple effect, digital share-cards, legacy media credibility	Humanized Ripple Effect	
	F	reusable materials, cultural level, partnerships, media	Reusable & Relatable	

RQ3: What are the primary challenges and opportunities in implementing sustainability communications in Ghanaian PR practice?	A	Tokenism, greenwashing, measuring impact, lack vision/data, technical skills gap	Data & Capacity Deficit	Capacity Constraints
	B	profit vs local cost, expensive raw materials, greenwashing temptation	Profit–Sustainability Tension	
	C	ad-hoc CSR view, budget constraint, measurability	Strategic & Resource Barriers	
	D	short turnaround, huge reports, lack ESG capacity, budget limits	Time & Expertise Gaps	
	E	intent vs investment, lack long-term focus, data transparency missing, media knowledge gap	Investment & Data Gap	
	F	tailoring relatable messaging, alternatives not available/feasible, client flip-flopping	Relatable Alternatives Missing	
Conclusion	A	thought leadership, consultancy, elevate PR profession	PR as Sustainability Leaders	Practitioner Leadership

B	equip professionals, champion across sectors, guide unaware businesses	Professional Empowerment
C	educate clients, become expert prescribers, mandatory initiatives	Expert Prescriber Role
D	build capacity + specialization, co-create narratives, academic support	Specialization & Training
E	competitive edge, youth culture, data transparency, heart of brand narrative	Competitive Thought Leadership
F	more training, live the lifestyle, wide reach in future	Education & Lifestyle Change