PRIMAITB 2024
Pameran Riset, Inovasi, dan Pengabdian kepada Masyarakat

Symbolic or Substantive: How Leadership-Driven ESG Communication Authenticity Shapes Public Trust in Indonesia

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Abstract

Environmental, Social, and Governance (ESG) communication gains prominence in establishing business legitimacy; a crucial inquiry arises: does leadership-driven sustainability messaging signify genuine commitment or merely symbolic signaling?. This study utilizes social construction theory and the emotional systematic response framework to analyze the impact of leadership visibility and message authenticity on public trust in ESG risk communication in Indonesia.

The study utilized a multi-factorial between-subjects experimental design that systematically modified three variables: (1) leadership visibility (high vs. low), (2) message framing (gain vs. loss), and (3) construal level (concrete vs. abstract) in simulated ESG communication.

A total of 254 executives and professionals from FMCG, Oil & Gas, and manufacturing sectors will be allocated to experimental conditions and later assessed for perceived authenticity, trustworthiness, and public trust using validated multi-item scales. Then, the data will be examined by Integrating Predictive Modelling, supplemented by interaction and moderated mediation testing through bootstrapping processes.

This study will contribute to the enhancement of implementation of symbolic versus substantive ESG communication in emerging economies by integrating legitimacy and decoupling perspectives. The findings will provide theoretical insights into the mechanisms of trust development in corporate risk communication and present evidence-based recommendations for businesses aiming to synchronize leadership visibility with genuine sustainability narratives.

Keywords: ESG communication; employee-generated content; message framing; construal level; legitimacy; Indonesia

Introduction

ESG communication can build legitimacy, but audiences increasingly question claims that look promotional or disconnected from practice. Firms control two levers: **who** delivers the message and **how** it is written.

Source. Firm-generated content (FGC) is official; employee-generated content (EGC) is personal and often assumed to be more credible.

Framing. Gain frames stress benefits of acting; loss frames stress costs of inaction.

Construal. Concrete messages give numbers and specific results; abstract messages state values without figures.

Research question: How do source, framing and construal, alone and together, shape perceptions of ESG messages?

Research Framework

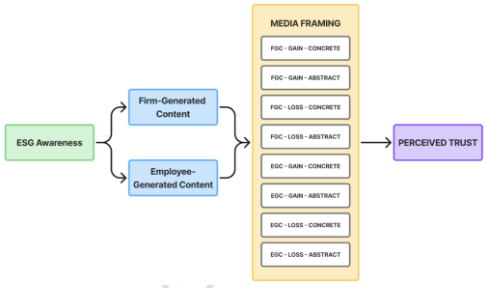


Figure. Research framework.

Research Method

Design. 2 × 2 × 2 between-subjects survey experiment; each respondent saw one of eight simulated Instagram posts (G1–G8). Adapted from the proposal: message source (firm vs. employee) was tested in place of leadership visibility.

Participants. 250 participants executives and professionals (private and state-owned firms from FMCG, Oil & Gas, and manufacturing sectors 8 April – 24 May 2026.

	Gain + Concrete	Gain + Abstract	Loss + Concrete	Loss + Abstract
FGC	G1	G2	G3	G4
EGC	G5	G6	G7	G8

Table 1. Experimental conditions. Teal = "fit" pairings.

Gain + Concrete (G1) | Gain + Abstract (G2)

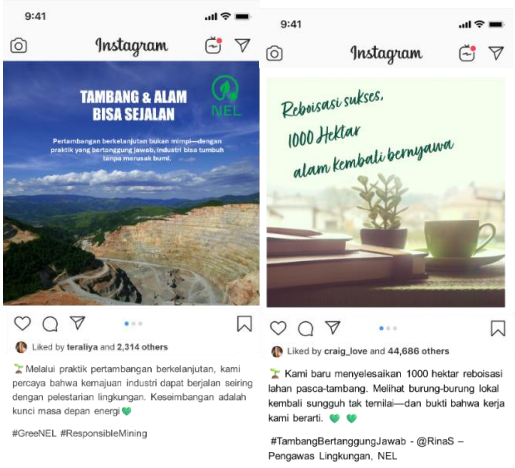


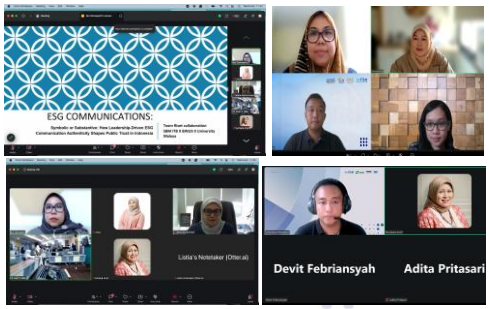
Figure 1. Example stimuli (firm-generated). The concrete version reports figures (15,000 SMEs; 20,000 t CO_2); the abstract version states purpose only.

Data screening

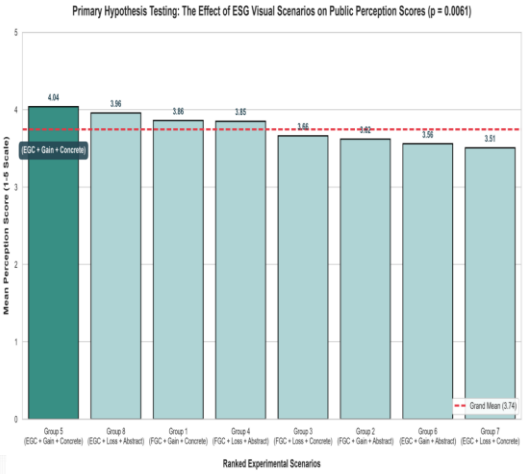
254 responses → −0 missing / straight-lining → −25 univariate |z| > 3.29 → −11 Mahalanobis p < .001 → 218 valid

Balance check. Groups did not differ in environmental awareness (1–7 scale, M = 6.21–6.54; one-way ANOVA p = .31).

Analysis. One-way ANOVA on mean perception score (1–5) across eight scenarios; binomial test for stated source preference.



Key Findings



1. **Fit beats source.** All four top scenarios pair gain with concrete or loss with abstract (M = 3.85–4.04); all four bottom ones are mismatches (M = 3.51–3.66).
2. **Source alone ≈ no difference.** Averaged across cells, EGC and FGC posts scored almost the same (3.77 vs 3.75, unweighted).
3. **Stated preference favours EGC.** 152 of 218 (69.7%) chose employee posts when asked directly (p < .001).

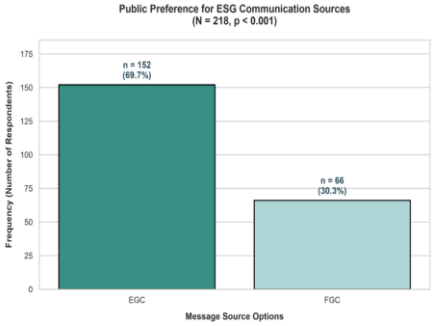


Figure 3. Stated source preference (N = 218).

Conclusion

How an ESG message is built matters more than who posts it. Respondents **say** they prefer employee voices, but an employee post alone did not raise ratings.

Implication: pair benefit messages with specific, verifiable figures; frame risk messages around values and purpose. Use employee voices to add credibility, not to replace message design.