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Media Representation of Environmental Issues and Its Influence on Youth Awareness

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Abstract

Global issues like climate change, disappearance of biodiversity, pollution and depletion of resources have become common topics of concern. The media institutions are significant in creating the knowledge of the general population concerning these environmental issues by constructing and communicating the environmental discourse within the conventional and virtual media. The paper dwells on how the media portrays environmental issues and how they influence the youths in their bid to become environmentally conscious and concerned about environmental sustainability. The paper critically analyses the ways in which the perception of the environment amongst the youths can be impacted using the new knowledge of environmental communication, that is, through media framing, agenda-setting, and digital environmental campaigns. The study is theoretically and literature-based in discussing current trends of environmental communication and engagement with the youths. The findings reveal that media exposure is also a major factor in environmental awareness among young people by shaping knowledge, attitudes and perceptions towards environmental hazards. Problems of inaccuracy, dramaticism and fragmentary environmental communication may diminish the effectiveness of environmental communication. The paper argues that the young generation should be informed of environmental awareness by means of responsible environmental journalism and enhanced media literacy. The paper concluded by suggesting a conceptual model of how media representation can affect youth environmental awareness and pro-environmental behavior via the use of agenda setting, framing process and digital engagement.

Key-words: environmental communication, media representation, youth awareness, climate communication, sustainability, media literacy etc.

Introduction

Ecological destruction has become one of the most topical issues facing modern societies. Climate change, deforestation, loss of biodiversity, pollution, and water scarcity are among the issues that have endangered the ecological systems and human wellbeing around the world. To overcome these environmental issues, scientific solutions, as well as policy interventions are not enough, but popular awareness and behavioral change. In this respect, communication has a vital role in creating awareness to the citizens of environmental hazards and sustainable practices. Media organizations play the crucial role of the mediators of scientific information and the general awareness of environmental problems. Environmental information is then converted in forms of a story that is aimed at influencing how people view

environmental issues through news coverage, documentaries, and online media platforms. Media representation describes how environmental issues are constructed, conceived and conveyed using various media content. These images have an impact on viewers to comprehend the environmental issues that may arise and whether they can view the problems as serious social issues. The increase in the power of digital media has dramatically altered the environmental communication arena. Social media, online video networks and electronic journalism have increased the possibilities of spreading environmental information and involving people in the environmental discussion. Youths have been the important players in this system of communication because they often get environmental information online and are also engaged in environmental agitation over the internet. In recent literature, media exposure has been proposed to be

significant in forming environmental awareness among youthful viewers. Online environmental campaigns have been identified to increase environmental awareness and support sustainable practices among the younger generation (Peiró-Signes et al., 2025). Equally, studies have shown that media narratives also help to construct the perception of people about climate risks and environmental sustainability (Lee, 2024). Although such positive changes have been realized, there are several challenges associated with environmental communication. The dissemination of misinformation in online media space, the episodic aspect of environmental news reporting and the sophistication of environmental science can make environmental issue dissemination difficult. These issues reveal the necessity to investigate the impact of the media image on environmental consciousness, especially among younger users who are more dependent on digital media as a source of data. The purpose of the study is thus to identify how media coverage of environmental problems is related to environmental awareness among the youths using the conceptual framework of current research in environmental communication.

Objectives of the Study

1. To examine how environmental issues are represented across different media platforms.
2. To analyse the influence of media narratives on youth environmental awareness.
3. To explore the role of digital media in shaping youth engagement with environmental issues.
4. To identify challenges associated with media representation of environmental issues.
5. To propose a conceptual model explaining the relationship between media representation and youth environmental awareness.

Literature Review

Scholars have been focusing on environmental communication with growing interest trying to comprehend the impact that media institutions have on the perspectives of people towards ecological issues. The media can serve as an important mediator between scientific information and general discourse interpreting the complex environmental information into familiar stories. Lee (2024) confirms that media coverage has been central in the formation of how the masses interact with the issue of climate change because it frames the problem of environmental issues in a manner that affects how the audience perceives it and cares about it. According to recent scholarship, the role of digital media platforms in environmental communication is on the rise. With social media spaces, the environmental organizations, individuals and activists can inform masses about environmental issues as well as mobilize the masses towards sustainability efforts. According to Hajri (2024), digital media space allows participation in the environmental communication process, in which the audience actively contributes to the environmental content via discussions, sharing content, and online campaigns. The studies on the topic of youth engagement show that younger generations become increasingly concerned with the sustainability of the environment. The group of people, who are most inclined to making climate action and environmental protection their priorities, has been

recognized as Generation Z (Salguero et al., 2024). Exposure to environmental information on digital media platforms adds value to such awareness by enhancing awareness about environmental risks and practices on environmental sustainability. Nevertheless, researchers have also identified several issues to do with environmental communication in the digital media spaces. The fast spread of information on social media sites can help to promote misinformation in the field of environmental science. According to Ahmed (2026), misinformation in climatic change may weaken the scientific consensus and confuse the audience which is not scientifically literate enough to analyze conflicting arguments. The other issue is associated with the character of environmental media coverage. The environmental narratives tend to be treated episodically in the mainstream media, which generally takes place when there is an environmental crisis like a flood or wildfire. These sporadic reporting can suppress the knowledge of people on the structural factors of environmental degradation and shorten the long-term interest in the problem of environmental sustainability (Elishar, 2025). There are also psychological impacts of environmental communication on the youths that have been examined by scholars. The growing popularity of the discussion of climate change has led to the development of climate anxiety, a phenomenon that characterizes the state of distress related to environmental degradation (Watson et al., 2025). Although those emotional reactions may be inspirational to environmental activism, it can also result in a sense of helplessness when the audience feels that environmental issues are pervasive. Generally, the literature indicates that media has a great influence in the creation of environmental consciousness among the youth. Nevertheless, the success of environmental communication lies in how environmental problems are characterized and presented in media discourses.

Research Gap

Despite the current studies which have discussed the importance of media in environmental communication, there are several gaps in the extant literature. A significant portion of the current literature concentrates more on the communication of climate change in the Western setting and does not pay much attention to the bigger environmental challenges and various media landscapes. Moreover, most of the research examines the patterns of media coverage or what people think without providing the combined effect of media representation, online interaction, and environmental awareness among the youth. The other gap is about the fast-changing digital media world. Past studies have primarily concentrated on traditional media like newspapers and TV, but the modern audience is relying more on social media and online contents to access information about the environment. This change demands new conceptualizations which consider interactive communication practices and participatory environmental discussion. Moreover, although youth are often considered the key stakeholders in environmental sustainability, little research has combined media representation theories with research on youth environmental awareness. This paper aims to fill these gaps by summarizing current research and suggesting a theoretical framework that will explain how media portrayal acts upon youth environmental awareness using agenda-setting process, framing and digital interaction.

Theoretical Framework

Media representation and its relation to youth environmental awareness can be discussed in the framework of several communication theories. The agenda-setting theory posits that media institutions have the capacity to shape the priorities of the people by defining the coverage that is given to an issue by the media. With environmental issues being given consistent coverage in the media discourse, there is a greater chance that the audience will view them as a significant social issue. The theory of framing also provides an explanation of how media stories influence their interpretation of environmental issues by the audience. Media frame puts a spotlight on certain parts of environmental problems and minimizes other parts and thus shapes the ways in which viewers perceive causes and impacts of environmental problems. As an illustration, environmental issues can be defined in the technological, political or ethical sustainability-related responsibilities. The same theory of uses and gratifications also offers an elucidation of the active participation of the audiences in the environmental media content. Youths often demand environmental information by using digital platforms that enable them to engage with environmental content, engage in a discussion and even engage in environmental activism.

Research Methodology

This study adopts conceptual qualitative research because of the comprehensive survey of the current literature on the topic of environmental communication and youth involvement. The conceptual research proved to be especially helpful in synthesizing the theoretical perspectives and the determination of the new tendencies in a field of research. Sustainability communication, media studies, and environmental journalism academic publications were examined to single out the main themes of media presentation and environmental awareness among youths.

Media Representation of Environmental Issues

Environmental issues are also represented in the media through various communication media such as news media, documentaries, and digital media networks. All these platforms play a role in environmental discourse formation, as they frame environmental issues in a certain manner. The traditional news media serves a significant purpose in making people aware of the environmental activities, such as environmental negotiations of climate change, environmental policies, and ecological disasters. Nonetheless, in several respects, the issue of environmental journalism is prone to structural limitations like lack of space in the editorial paragraphs and economic concerns that might diminish the continuous coverage of environmental problems. The new effective tools of environmental storytelling have been environmental documentaries and visual media. The documentaries are able to attract images of the impact of environmental degradation and encourage the viewers to consider the issue of sustainability using appealing stories and visual images. The digital media platforms have also changed the way environmental communication is done by offering convenient ways of transferring environmental information and engagement with the audience. Social media campaigns enable environmental groups to engage the youth in activities and create environmental

consciousness by using digital narratives, and advocacy campaigns.

Youth Awareness and Environmental Communication

The increased awareness of the youth in the environment has elevated considerably in recent years because of the prevalence of environmental information on digital media platforms. Online news stories, social media campaigns, and environmental documentaries are some of the ways that young audiences meet the environmental message. Exposure helps in raising awareness on issues concerning the environment and fosters discussion on sustainability among the youths. Research however suggests that awareness also does not necessarily translate to change in behavior. The media communication can hence create a significant role in the closure of the gap between environmental literacy and sustainable practices.

Challenges in Media Representation

Environmental communication suffers several challenges in the modern media environment. The spread of misinformation on online platforms has the potential to mislead the population about environmental problems and destroy their faith in scientific data. Crisis in the environment can also be sensationalized by media coverage without a proper context, and this can also help to cause the audience fatigue and skepticism. Moreover, environmental concerns do not have enough attention as compared to the news on politics or entertainment, which can minimize prolonged public involvement in environmental sustainability.

Role of Media Literacy

Media literacy is significant in empowering viewers with critical analysis of the media presented information about the environment. Media literacy education may assist youth audiences in locating misinformation, determining the trustworthiness of media sources, and comprehending how the environmental problems are promoted in the discourse. Media literacy can thus be integrated with environmental education to enhance the knowledge of the population on environmental issues and to enable the youth to engage more in environmental communication.



Figure 1. Conceptual model illustrating the relationship between media representation and youth environmental awareness.

Conclusion

Media representation has a great presence in the creation of youth awareness and environmental awareness in modern communities. The media institutions shape not only the nature of the attention that people pay to the issues concerning the environment but also the ways the issues should be perceived and debated in the context of the other social field. Media outlets can help to create the perception of the general audience regarding environmental issues like climate change, pollution, loss of biodiversity, and sustainability by choosing narratives, visual design, and interpretive frames. Consequently, the way media outlets frame environmental issues can have a very strong effect on the perception of young viewers of the urgency and relevance of the issue. The nature of communication on the environment has also been changed by the accelerated development of the online communication means, and the digital media. The social media networks, online news portals and online campaigns have provided emerging opportunities of dispensing the environmental information besides engaging the youth audiences in the sustainability dialogues. The young generation is becoming increasingly dependent on digital media as the source of information, becoming a part of the discussion on the environment, and rallying around the awareness of environmental causes. It is here that environmental messages will have a far-reaching effect and result into participatory communication that will make the youth abandon passive reception of information to active involvement in environmental advocacies and sustainability activities.

However, in spite of such an opportunity, there are several pressing issues that face communication on the environment in the media context. The falsehood and disinformation created around environmental science may result in a distorted understanding of the consciousness of the people and the distrust on the good environmental information. The sensationalization of environmental disasters by the media can also be practiced without providing justifiable background and solutions that may result to audience boredom or cynicism. Besides, the ecological issues are less, or not evenly covered, as compared with the political news or news about entertainment, and this aspect might reduce the long-term engagement of the population in the ecological issues. To address such problems, it is necessary to possess the commitment to responsible environmental journalism and promote media literacy (critical) among the audiences and primarily among the youth. The media houses are highly critical of delivering scientifically accurate, balanced and contextual environmental stories that are likely to initiate constructive discussion in the community. At the same time, media literacy education could assist the young population having analytical aptitudes to attain the plausibility of data regarding the environment, differentiate between misinformation and critically read the media reporting of environmental problems. It, therefore, comes in force by strengthening environment communication through establishment of responsible media practices and development of media literacy thus creating environmentally conscious and socially responsible youth. Such awareness is essential in the creation of pro-environmental attitudes and behaviours that can support the sustainable development goals. By providing the younger generations with the motivation to critically think about the information they obtain about the

environment and engage more actively into the environmental discussion in the future, media could alter the attitude of the younger generations towards the problem of environmental sustainability.

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