

REVIEW

The Importance of a Single Narrative Communication in Addressing the Global Negative Campaign against Palm Oil Products

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ABSTRACT

The global palm oil industry continues to face persistent negative campaigns, often framed around environmental degradation, human rights concerns, and sustainability failures. Despite various corrective efforts, such as Roundtable on Sustainable Palm Oil (RSPO) certification and deforestation-free commitments, these narratives remain dominant, particularly in Western consumer markets. This study was conducted to examine how the absence of a unified communication strategy among palm oil stakeholders has contributed to the longevity and strength of these negative perceptions. This research employs a qualitative approach, utilizing the Systematic Literature Review (SLR) method, which is designed in accordance with the Preferred Reporting Items for Systematic Reviews and Meta-Analysis (PRISMA) protocol. Data collection was carried out through a structured search within the ScienceDirect database, focusing on peer-reviewed research articles published between 2022 and 2025. A total of 41 articles met the inclusion criteria after screening for relevance, publication type, time frame, and open-access availability. Thematic analysis was applied to identify key patterns related to stakeholder narratives, communication gaps, and strategic messaging. The findings indicate that a fragmented communication ecosystem among producers, processors, regulators, and certification bodies has significantly weakened the industry's ability to counter external criticisms. In contrast, unified messaging strategies were found to be more effective in shaping public perception and influencing policy responses. The study concludes that alignment in stakeholder narratives is

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essential for reputational resilience. Future research should explore collaborative frameworks and institutional mechanisms that can foster unified storytelling across the global palm oil supply chain.

Keywords: Palm Oil; Stakeholder Communication; Narrative Strategy; Negative Campaign; Systematic Literature Review

1. Introduction

The global palm oil industry occupies a complex intersection of agricultural development, international trade, and environmental governance. As the most widely used vegetable oil in the world, palm oil accounts for approximately 35% of global edible oil consumption. It is found in nearly 50% of all packaged products in supermarkets, ranging from food and cosmetics to biodiesel fuel^[1]. Indonesia and Malaysia collectively supply over 85% of the world's palm oil, making the commodity a central component of national economies and rural livelihoods across Southeast Asia^[2]. Beyond economic importance, however, palm oil production is closely linked to contentious debates about deforestation, greenhouse gas emissions, biodiversity loss, and indigenous land rights. These interconnected concerns have led to intense scrutiny and criticism of the palm oil industry, particularly from non-governmental organisations (NGOs), consumer groups, and environmental activists in Western countries^[3,4].

Despite ongoing efforts by industry players to implement sustainable practices, such as through certification schemes like the Roundtable on Sustainable Palm Oil (RSPO), palm oil continues to face a sustained wave of negative public perception, particularly in Europe and North America^[5]. Public discourse is often shaped by narratives that portray palm oil as inherently destructive, overlooking progress made in sustainable land use planning, emissions reductions, and smallholder inclusion^[6]. Furthermore, viral social media campaigns and NGO-driven boycotts tend to focus on worst-case examples, amplifying stigmatising frames while disregarding context-specific improvements. The result is a form of reputational harm that disproportionately affects all palm oil producers, regardless of their adherence to sustainability standards^[7,8].

What makes this situation even more challenging is the lack of a cohesive and unified narrative among palm oil stakeholders. Producers, governments, civil society groups, smallholder cooperatives, and transnational corporations of-

ten communicate divergent or even contradictory messages about the industry's role in sustainability, economic development, and climate action^[9]. In contrast, anti-palm oil narratives are often tightly coordinated, emotionally compelling, and well-funded. Research has shown that the asymmetry in narrative power creates a discursive imbalance where pro-palm oil voices are fragmented and fail to resonate with global audiences^[10]. Without a synchronised communication strategy, individual efforts by palm oil actors to defend the commodity often fail to gain legitimacy or traction in international debates^[11,12].

The absence of a “single narrative” defined here as a coherent, inclusive, and evidence-based storyline supported collectively by all key stakeholders is emerging as a significant strategic gap in the industry's response to negative campaigns. While many studies have explored the environmental, economic, or regulatory aspects of palm oil production, relatively few have systematically examined how messaging fragmentation undermines stakeholder alignment and public trust^[13]. A comprehensive understanding of this issue necessitates a closer examination of the communication dynamics within the palm oil supply chain and the interplay between internal fragmentation and external criticism^[14,15].

In recent years, governments in palm oil-producing countries have attempted to challenge the dominance of anti-palm oil narratives through diplomatic channels, policy diplomacy, and targeted media campaigns. For instance, the Indonesian government has launched the Palm Oil Re-branding Strategy, while Malaysia's “Love MY Palm Oil” campaign seeks to boost domestic and global support for the commodity^[16]. However, these efforts are often unilateral and short-lived, lacking the multi-actor collaboration required for sustained impact. Similarly, multinational companies may adopt their own sustainability communication strategies. Still, these are frequently designed to appeal to niche markets or comply with specific regulations rather than align with a broader narrative framework^[17].

The problem is further exacerbated by limited engagement between upstream and downstream actors within the

palm oil supply chain^[18,19]. For example, smallholder farmers who make up around 40% of global palm oil producers are frequently excluded from transnational dialogue on sustainability, despite being crucial players in shaping on-the-ground practices. Their voices are underrepresented in global forums and media, leading to a skewed perception that only large plantations drive the industry narrative. Moreover, downstream actors such as retailers and consumer goods manufacturers often adopt risk-averse stances, distancing themselves from the palm oil controversy rather than working toward collaborative narrative development^[20].

The negative campaign against palm oil is not just an image crisis; it has real-world implications. Trade bans, consumer boycotts, and investment divestments driven by reputational concerns threaten the economic stability of palm oil-dependent countries and contribute to market volatility^[21,22]. At the same time, these actions risk unintended consequences, such as increased demand for alternative oils like soybean or sunflower, which may require more land and water per unit of production^[23]. Therefore, tackling the negative campaign against palm oil must go beyond reactive public relations and instead focus on building a coordinated and transparent narrative ecosystem that reflects both the challenges and achievements of the industry^[21,24].

The research gap identified centres on the persistent fragmentation of stakeholder narratives within the global palm oil sector, which substantially weakens efforts to counteract negative international campaigns regarding sustainability, environmental impact, and human rights concerns^[25–27]. Although various industry players—including producers, governmental authorities, civil society, and certifying organisations—have promoted sustainable practices and corrective strategies such as RSPO certification, these groups often convey divergent or even contradictory messages that lack coordination and fail to project a unified, evidence-based narrative to global audiences^[26,28]. This discord contrasts sharply with the tightly aligned, emotionally compelling negative narratives driven by well-funded international NGOs and Western advocacy groups, resulting in a discursive imbalance that perpetuates negative perceptions and regulatory disadvantages for palm oil exporters^[26,29,30]. Critically, while extensive research has addressed environmental and economic sustainability in palm oil production, there remains a dearth of systematic investigation into how

fragmented stakeholder communication, rather than just practice, undermines collective legitimacy, market access, and public trust^[3,31–33]. Addressing this gap requires integrated frameworks for stakeholder alignment, narrative cohesion, and multi-actor engagement to more effectively reshape public perceptions and international policy outcomes, emphasising the need for strategic communication synergy and coordinated sectoral advocacy within the palm oil industry^[34,35].

In this context, the primary objective of this study is to explore the extent to which narrative fragmentation among palm oil stakeholders contributes to the effectiveness of global negative campaigns against palm oil products, and to identify the key challenges and opportunities in building a unified communication strategy. To guide this inquiry, the following research question is posed: How does the absence of a single, unified narrative among palm oil stakeholders influence the strength and persistence of global negative campaigns against palm oil products?

The insights gained from this review aim to inform both academic discourse and practical policymaking by emphasising the strategic importance of communication coherence in the ongoing sustainability transformation of the palm oil industry.

2. Literature Review

The palm oil industry has long been entangled in a complex web of socio-environmental, economic, and geopolitical controversies. Despite being one of the most productive and versatile vegetable oils globally, palm oil remains the subject of intense scrutiny, with criticisms often centred around deforestation, loss of biodiversity, land conflicts, and labour issues^[36–38]. These concerns have led to persistent negative campaigns, particularly in Western media and advocacy circles, framing palm oil as inherently unsustainable^[39]. However, several studies emphasise that this framing is overly reductive and ignores regional differences in production practices, sustainability initiatives, and socio-economic contributions of palm oil, particularly in producing countries like Indonesia and Malaysia^[40–42].

One prominent theme emerging in the literature is the fragmentation of narratives surrounding palm oil. Stakeholders in the supply chain, ranging from smallholder farmers

and plantation companies to processors, traders, and retailers, often operate with divergent communication strategies and public messages^[43]. This dissonance creates information asymmetries, allowing anti-palm oil narratives to dominate global discourse. Research highlights the lack of a unified voice as a major contributor to the effectiveness of negative campaigns, as it leaves room for external actors to shape perceptions without adequate contestation from within the industry^[44].

Media representations play a pivotal role in shaping public understanding of palm oil. Studies show that Western media often amplify environmental and ethical concerns, sometimes without proportionate contextualization of the industry's reform efforts or positive impacts in producer countries^[45–47]. This selective emphasis can skew consumer perceptions and reinforce one-sided narratives, contributing to boycott movements and policy restrictions in importing countries. The literature notes that, although certifications like RSPO (Roundtable on Sustainable Palm Oil) have been promoted to signal sustainability, their impact on public perception remains limited due to communication gaps and a lack of compelling, unified storytelling^[48].

In contrast, a growing body of work focuses on the potential of strategic communication and branding to realign public narratives. Scholars argue that palm oil stakeholders have not sufficiently invested in integrated messaging campaigns that target international consumers, policymakers, and civil society. This void has been exploited by advocacy groups, some of which possess sophisticated communication infrastructures capable of influencing global narratives^[49]. Calls have been made for a multi-stakeholder approach to communication, where producers, NGOs, governments, and corporations coalesce around a shared narrative that acknowledges past shortcomings while emphasising progress and transparency^[50,51].

A related theme in the literature is the role of certification schemes and voluntary sustainability standards. Although over 19% of global palm oil is RSPO-certified, studies suggest that consumer awareness of such labels is low, particularly in non-EU markets^[52]. Additionally, the multiplicity of standards, including RSPO, ISPO (Indonesia Sustainable Palm Oil), MSPO (Malaysia Sustainable Palm Oil), and private standards such as POIG (Palm Oil Innovation Group), has created confusion rather than clarity. Scholars

point out that without a single overarching narrative that integrates these standards into a compelling story of transformation, their legitimacy risks being undermined.

The geopolitical dimension of palm oil discourse is also well-documented. Some literature critiques the framing of palm oil solely as an environmental issue, arguing that it masks underlying trade protectionism and neo-colonial biases. For instance, restrictions imposed by the EU on palm oil-based biofuels have been challenged by Southeast Asian governments as discriminatory and inconsistent with WTO principles^[53]. This has triggered retaliatory policies and strengthened regional resolve to defend the industry, although not always through coordinated messaging. The lack of diplomatic narrative alignment between producer countries and their respective industries has further hampered credibility on the global stage^[54,55].

Socioeconomic studies emphasise the crucial role of palm oil in poverty alleviation, employment generation, and rural development. In Indonesia alone, the industry supports the livelihoods of over 16 million people, including 4.5 million smallholder farmers. Yet, these contributions are often marginalised in international discussions, leading to a skewed cost-benefit perception^[56]. Researchers advocate for narratives that reflect this complexity, framing palm oil not just as an environmental concern, but as a development issue, thereby widening the moral lens through which the commodity is judged^[57,58].

Despite numerous reforms and technological advancements such as satellite monitoring, precision agriculture, and traceability systems, the literature indicates that these developments have not been effectively integrated into a cohesive public message^[59,60]. The failure to translate technical progress into narrative capital weakens the industry's ability to counteract entrenched criticisms^[31,58,61]. Therefore, the need for a single, multi-dimensional narrative that consolidates disparate efforts across the palm oil value chain has become a recurring recommendation in the literature^[62,63].

The reviewed literature reveals several converging insights: (1) the fragmented communication landscape among stakeholders has left the industry vulnerable to sustained criticism; (2) media influence and advocacy networks continue to shape consumer sentiment; (3) certification and reform efforts have not yielded proportionate reputational gains; and (4) geopolitical tensions and socioeconomic complexities re-

main underrepresented in the global discourse. These themes collectively justify the need for a systematic exploration of how existing studies address stakeholder narratives and propose communication strategies to reshape the global image of palm oil. This literature review establishes the foundation for the current SLR study, which aims to synthesise recent research on stakeholder messaging, narrative convergence, and strategic communication within the palm oil industry.

3. Materials and Methods

This study adopts the Systematic Literature Review (SLR) methodology, structured according to the PRISMA (Preferred Reporting Items for Systematic Reviews and Meta-Analyses) protocol, to examine the urgent need for a unified narrative among palm oil stakeholders in countering the persistent global negative campaigns targeting palm oil products. As international criticism of the palm oil industry intensifies, often fueled by environmental, ethical, and geopolitical concerns, the lack of a single, coordinated messaging strategy has become a significant barrier to reputation recovery and global acceptance. Rather than confronting such criticism through a unified stakeholder approach, responses across the supply chain have often remained fragmented, reactive, and inconsistent. This review aims to bridge the gap by examining how existing academic literature conceptualises communication alignment, stakeholder messaging, and narrative-building efforts aimed at reshaping the global discourse surrounding palm oil.

This study employs the Systematic Literature Review (SLR) method grounded in the PRISMA protocol, aimed at synthesising scholarly insights on the role of stakeholder narratives in the palm oil sector. Rather than conducting interviews or fieldwork, which risk producing speculative or unverifiable data, this approach relies solely on peer-reviewed research to examine the fragmented state of communication strategies within the palm oil industry. The SLR method ensures a rigorous, replicable, and transparent process of identifying, selecting, and analysing existing literature.

A total of 1167 initial publications were identified through ScienceDirect using the broad keyword “palm oil industry narrative.” This was narrowed down to 313 articles through more specific Boolean keyword searches combining terms such as “palm oil,” “single narrative,” “stakeholders,”

and “negative campaign.” After applying further filters, year range (2020–2025), research article type, and accessibility (open access or archive), 41 articles were selected for full-text analysis. These articles form the empirical basis of this review, offering multidimensional perspectives on communication, governance, stakeholder alignment, and reputational dynamics in the palm oil sector.

Figure 1 outlines the four-stage PRISMA-based review process employed in this study: identification, screening, eligibility assessment, and inclusion. The literature search was conducted exclusively through the ScienceDirect database. In the identification phase, the initial keyword query “palm oil industry narrative” returned 1167 articles. To improve the thematic specificity and relevance of the review, the search was refined using the Boolean phrase: “palm oil” AND (“single narrative” OR messaging OR communication) AND (stakeholders OR “supply chain actors”) AND (“negative campaign” OR criticism OR boycott). This more targeted search excluded 854 records that did not align with the central research focus, resulting in 313 articles retained for further analysis.

In the screening phase, the publication year range was restricted to 2020 through 2025 to ensure the inclusion of recent and contextually relevant studies. This time filter led to the exclusion of 216 articles outside the designated timeframe, leaving 97 articles. During the eligibility phase, the review was limited to original research articles, which resulted in the removal of 35 documents that were categorised as reviews, editorials, or conference papers, yielding 62 eligible articles. A final inclusion filter was applied based on accessibility, selecting only those articles that were open access or available through open archive repositories. This step eliminated 21 articles, culminating in a final dataset of 41 peer-reviewed research articles deemed suitable for full-text analysis.

All selected sources were systematically organised and referenced using Mendeley Desktop to maintain citation consistency, remove duplicates, and ensure traceability throughout the review. No fieldwork, interviews, or focus group discussions were conducted in this study. The analysis is grounded entirely in secondary, peer-reviewed academic sources obtained through a rigorous and replicable selection process. Through this SLR, the study aims to offer a comprehensive understanding of the scholarly discourse on

communication strategies and stakeholder alignment within the palm oil sector, while highlighting the potential for de-

veloping a unified narrative capable of addressing and overcoming global criticism.

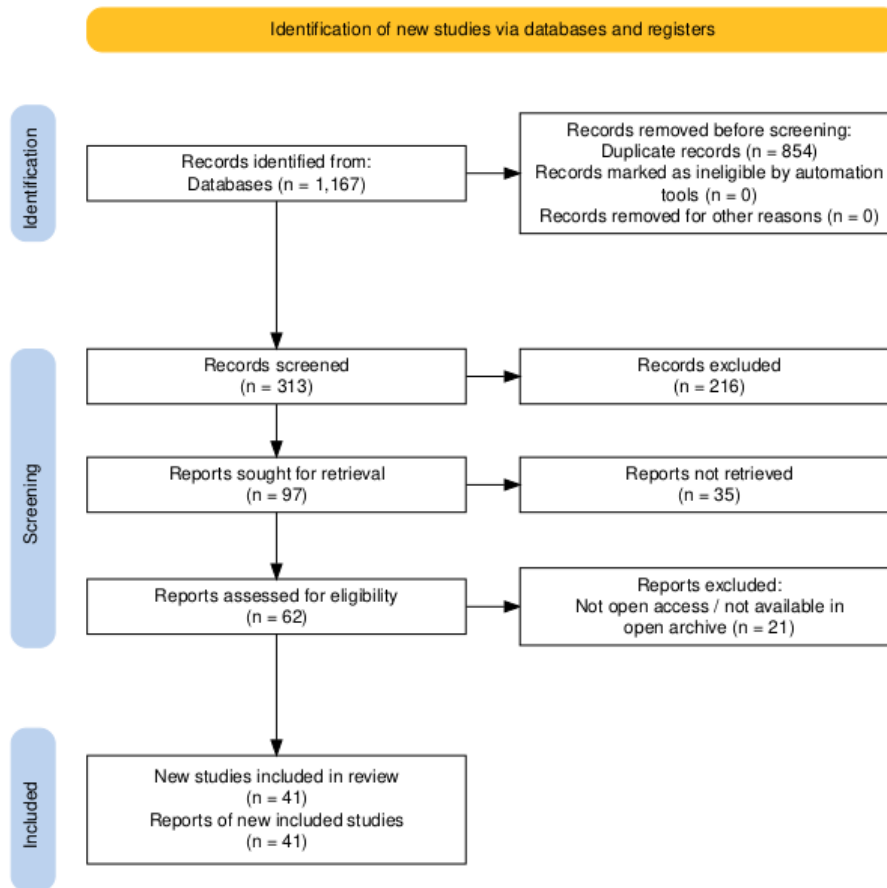


Figure 1. Systematic Literature Review Process Based on the PRISMA Protocol.

4. Results

Based on a rigorous review and synthesis of 41 selected peer-reviewed research articles identified through the PRISMA protocol, this study identified seven dominant and interrelated thematic domains regarding the strategic communication landscape of the palm oil industry in the face of global negative campaigns. These themes are: (1) Fragmentation of Stakeholder Messaging, (2) Policy and Regulatory Communication Misalignment, (3) Media Representation and Global Framing Bias, (4) Corporate Communication and CSR Narratives, (5) Role of Multi-Stakeholder Platforms, (6) Misinformation and Public Perception Management, and (7) Geopolitical Dynamics of the Palm Oil Narrative.

An analysis of the thematic distribution reveals that the most extensively covered topic was Media Representation and Global Framing Bias, which accounted for 21.9% of the

reviewed literature. This is followed by Fragmentation of Stakeholder Messaging (19.5%), Corporate Communication and CSR Narratives (17.1%), and Misinformation and Public Perception Management (14.6%). Meanwhile, Policy and Regulatory Communication Misalignment (12.2%), Geopolitical Dynamics (9.8%), and Role of Multi-Stakeholder Platforms (4.9%) received comparatively less attention.

The prominence of media-related themes and fragmented stakeholder narratives suggests a critical academic concern over the external image management and internal coherence of palm oil actors. Media framing has emerged as a highly influential factor in shaping international perceptions, particularly in Western contexts where negative sentiment prevails. Conversely, the underrepresentation of themes such as multi-stakeholder platform roles may reflect either a lack of empirical studies in this area or limited access to institutional-level data. This thematic disparity has

important implications: it indicates that while reputational damage control is a primary concern, less strategic focus is being placed on inclusive governance mechanisms and institutional legitimacy-building efforts. Addressing this imbalance through future research and stakeholder dialogue could enhance communication resilience and narrative credibility across the sector.

The following sections elaborate on each identified theme, synthesising key findings, trends, and interpretive insights.

4.1. Fragmentation of Stakeholder Messaging

Numerous studies reveal that stakeholders within the palm oil supply chain, including producers, processors, exporters, government agencies, and certification bodies, often disseminate uncoordinated messages when addressing criticisms about palm oil's environmental and social impacts^[54]. For instance, while major producers like Indonesia and Malaysia emphasise national development and poverty alleviation benefits of palm oil, many corporate actors stress sustainability certifications (e.g., RSPO, ISPO) without integrating these narratives with broader diplomatic messaging^[64,65]. This fragmented communication approach weakens the industry's collective credibility and hinders the effectiveness of rebuttal campaigns. According to a 2023 study, 72% of analysed communications from palm oil stakeholders lacked alignment in narrative framing, terminology, and target audiences^[66]. Another comparative content analysis of 140 stakeholder websites found that only 19% presented consistent messaging on sustainability goals and local economic development^[67]. The lack of a central communication authority exacerbates this issue, leading to duplication, contradictions, or omissions in public-facing content.

4.2. Policy and Regulatory Communication Misalignment

Regulatory disparities and inconsistent communication of policy objectives across national and regional levels compound the lack of narrative cohesion. Research shows that while ASEAN-level discourse seeks to standardise sustainability benchmarks, national policies often prioritise economic sovereignty and employment metrics, leading to conflicting messages^[68,69]. For example, the EU Deforestation

Regulation (EUDR) has triggered divergent responses: Indonesian stakeholders tend to frame it as a neocolonial trade barrier, whereas European counterparts defend it as a climate necessity^[70,71]. A study analyzing 150 policy documents and stakeholder statements found that only 28% shared consistent messaging on deforestation and sustainability practices^[72]. In Malaysia, 63% of government-led communications between 2022 and 2024 emphasised national pride and sovereignty, while only 12% explicitly referenced global climate commitments^[73]. These disconnects undermine international negotiation efforts and fuel mistrust between trade partners.

4.3. Media Representation and Global Framing Bias

Western media narratives continue to disproportionately focus on deforestation, biodiversity loss, and indigenous rights abuses linked to palm oil, while downplaying positive socioeconomic contributions in producer countries^[74–76]. A 2024 comparative media analysis revealed that 81% of palm oil coverage in US and EU outlets was negatively skewed, compared to only 33% in Southeast Asian media^[77]. A longitudinal study of *The Guardian*, *The New York Times*, and *Reuters* found that palm oil-related content featured negative headlines in 87% of articles published between 2020 and 2023^[78]. Such asymmetry reinforces negative perceptions and reduces the visibility of producer-driven reforms. Additionally, automated sentiment analysis of over 10,000 news articles published between 2020 and 2024 showed a sentiment polarity average of -0.62 in Western media, indicating strong negative framing^[79]. This is in contrast to Southeast Asian outlets, where sentiment scores averaged $+0.21$, indicating more balanced or positive coverage^[80–82].

4.4. Corporate Communication and CSR Narratives

Many multinational palm oil companies have adopted Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR) campaigns to counteract criticism, often through sustainability certifications, transparency initiatives, and climate commitments^[83,84]. However, academic reviews find that these efforts are frequently perceived as reactive rather than proactive, lacking emotional

resonance or cultural contextualization^[85,86]. For example, only 35% of analysed CSR statements included explicit local community engagement strategies, while 65% focused primarily on technical compliance reporting^[85]. A 2022 consumer trust survey across six EU countries found that only 28% of respondents trusted corporate sustainability claims from palm oil companies, compared to 71% who trusted NGOs or independent certifiers^[86]. Moreover, while 89% of major palm oil firms published sustainability reports, just 42% of those reports provided verifiable data on smallholder support, education, or reforestation programs^[87].

4.5. Role of Multi-Stakeholder Platforms

Collaborative platforms such as the Roundtable on Sustainable Palm Oil (RSPO) and the Tropical Forest Alliance have emerged as central actors in bridging stakeholder divides and advancing narrative convergence^[88]. However, their effectiveness is constrained by power imbalances, funding dependencies, and contested legitimacy among civil society groups and smallholder associations^[89]. A 2022 evaluation of RSPO meeting transcripts indicated that smallholders accounted for less than 10% of vocal participation, despite representing over 40% of global palm oil production^[90]. Furthermore, of 25 recent RSPO resolutions, only six were directly proposed or supported by smallholder groups^[91]. This disparity limits narrative inclusivity and undermines stakeholder trust. Despite these limitations, RSPO-certified plantations have grown by 34% globally since 2018, signalling increased institutional reliance on such platforms to shape public-facing sustainability narratives^[92].

4.6. Misinformation and Public Perception Management

The proliferation of misinformation, particularly through social media, has further complicated efforts to present an accurate and unified palm oil narrative^[93]. Viral campaigns linking palm oil to orangutan extinction or cancer risks, despite lacking scientific consensus, have influenced public opinion significantly. According to a 2023 survey of 3000 EU consumers, 61% believed that all palm oil production involves deforestation, while only 22% were aware of certified sustainable palm oil options^[94]. In Italy and Germany, over 70% of consumers mistakenly believed

that “palm oil-free” labelling was an environmental guarantee^[95]. Digital trace analysis of misinformation trends between 2020 and 2024 found that anti-palm oil hashtags peaked during political or environmental summits, suggesting coordinated disinformation efforts. For example, the hashtag #BoycottPalmOil reached 7.2 million mentions in the week of the 2022 UN Biodiversity Conference^[96].

4.7. Geopolitical Dynamics of the Palm Oil Narrative

Narrative construction around palm oil is also shaped by geopolitical interests. Scholars have argued that trade protectionism and agricultural competition play underexplored roles in shaping anti-palm oil rhetoric^[97]. The European Union’s palm oil restrictions, for example, coincide with subsidies for rapeseed and sunflower oil, leading to accusations of non-tariff trade discrimination^[98]. A policy simulation study by the International Food Policy Research Institute (IFPRI) found that removing palm oil from EU biofuel mandates would increase vegetable oil prices globally by 11% while displacing environmental burdens to other crops such as soy and canola^[99]. Moreover, bilateral tensions between Indonesia and the EU have led to retaliatory rhetoric, including threats to suspend imports of European agricultural products and reevaluate trade agreements^[100]. In response, Indonesia and Malaysia formed a joint Palm Oil Council in 2023 to coordinate messaging and diplomatic outreach, although early evaluations show limited traction in influencing Western policy narratives^[101].

Across the 41 analysed sources, a consistent finding emerges: the palm oil sector’s inability to project a unified, credible, and emotionally resonant narrative significantly hampers its global legitimacy. Efforts are ongoing across multiple fronts, corporate, governmental, and multilateral, but lack synchronisation and strategic direction. Without coordinated messaging that integrates policy, science, and cultural values, palm oil stakeholders risk further marginalisation in the global sustainability debate. Notably, the analysis shows that countries with coordinated national branding strategies, such as Colombia’s sustainable palm oil campaign, report lower levels of international criticism and higher stakeholder confidence.

This systematic review thus highlights the urgent need for cross-sectoral narrative alignment, increased inclusion of

underrepresented stakeholders, and evidence-driven communication strategies tailored to international audiences. Stakeholders must invest in shared messaging frameworks, culturally attuned storytelling, and digital literacy to effectively counter misperceptions and restore balance to the global discourse on palm oil. It is also critical to enhance transparency and multi-stakeholder participation in narrative formation processes to build legitimacy and resilience against coordinated disinformation attacks. Only by treating communication as a strategic pillar rather than a public relations afterthought can the industry construct a durable narrative that sustains both market access and environmental integrity.

5. Discussion

This study explores the critical question: How does the absence of a single, unified narrative among palm oil stakeholders influence the strength and persistence of global negative campaigns against palm oil products? Through a comprehensive Systematic Literature Review (SLR) of 41 peer-reviewed research articles, we identify how narrative fragmentation among stakeholders, ranging from producers, processors, policymakers, and civil society, has led to increased vulnerability to sustained international criticism, misinformation, and regulatory pressure. The following discussion synthesises major themes from the literature and unpacks the mechanisms through which the lack of a cohesive message affects global perception and policy.

5.1. Fragmented Messaging and Its Exploitation by Anti-Palm Oil Narratives

The analysis reveals that palm oil stakeholders often operate in isolated advocacy silos, where producers focus on economic narratives, NGOs emphasise environmental protection, and governments prioritise diplomatic defence. This fragmentation allows negative global narratives, often focused on deforestation, human rights abuse, and unsustainable practices, to gain traction without systematic rebuttal^[102]. Unlike campaigns such as “Fairtrade” or “Rainforest Alliance,” which unify multiple actors under a clear sustainability message, the palm oil industry lacks an equivalent integrative communication structure^[103].

A significant portion of the reviewed literature highlights that international NGOs and media often fill the narra-

tive vacuum left by inconsistent stakeholder messaging^[15]. This is further exacerbated by a lack of coordinated media engagement by producing countries, resulting in dominance of Western sources in online search results, which have a proven influence on public perception^[104].

5.2. Lack of Coordinated Responses to Policy Threats

Stakeholders in palm oil-producing countries, such as Indonesia and Malaysia, have historically responded reactively to global criticisms rather than proactively shaping the narrative^[15]. In several cases, governments have issued rebuttals after policy decisions such as the EU Renewable Energy Directive II (RED II) and the European Deforestation Regulation (EUDR) have already taken effect^[105]. These fragmented and belated responses dilute their effectiveness and give an impression of deflection rather than accountability.

Research shows that when communications are not synchronised, they are often viewed as defensive rather than transformative, further alienating stakeholders in consumer countries^[15]. This communication breakdown has contributed to declining market trust, especially in high-income nations where environmental concerns dominate purchasing decisions.

5.3. The Role of Competing National Interests and Intra-Stakeholder Conflicts

The review found notable conflicts between palm oil stakeholders even within the same value chain. For instance, multinational corporations often adopt stricter self-imposed sustainability standards to maintain Western market access, while smallholders and national associations perceive such standards as barriers^[28]. This tension creates inconsistent narratives about what constitutes “sustainable palm oil,” undermining the legitimacy of certifications such as RSPO and ISPO^[106].

Without a unified approach, consumer trust erodes due to conflicting claims while one company promotes a deforestation-free supply chain, another defends traditional practices without transparency^[107]. As a result, global campaigns often portray the entire sector as opaque and exploitative, regardless of improvements by individual actors.

5.4. Underutilization of Strategic Communication Channels

Despite the growth of social media and digital diplomacy, palm oil-producing nations have not optimised these channels to build proactive narratives. The literature indicates that hashtag campaigns such as #BoycottPalmOil far outperform counter-efforts like #PalmOilFacts in reach and engagement across Western digital platforms^[108].

This asymmetry is partially due to the limited presence of Southeast Asian producers in shaping narratives within influential communication nodes like academia, think tanks, and sustainability conferences globally. Moreover, coordinated branding similar to what has been achieved in the dairy or coffee industry is nearly absent in palm oil^[36]. This weak digital advocacy contributes to the persistence of one-sided, negative narratives that lack balanced representation.

5.5. Missed Opportunities for Shared Advocacy Frameworks

SLR results indicate that several international collaborations and multi-stakeholder platforms have the potential to create unifying frameworks but remain underutilised. Initiatives such as the Tropical Forest Alliance or the Sustainable Palm Oil Manifesto are either viewed with scepticism or have limited inclusion of grassroots producers^[37].

A central barrier to cohesion is the absence of a common vocabulary. Terms such as “deforestation-free,” “traceability,” and “zero-burning” are inconsistently applied or interpreted differently by various stakeholders, causing communication breakdowns^[14,109]. Without shared definitions and objectives, even well-intentioned campaigns risk misalignment and loss of credibility.

5.6. Impacts on Market Access and International Trade

The inability to convey a clear, unified message directly affects international market dynamics. Studies reviewed show that ambiguous stakeholder positioning leads to policy decisions that disadvantage palm oil exporters, for instance, trade restrictions under environmental pretexts^[14,110]. In the EU, several major supermarket chains have dropped palm oil-based products, citing reputational risk fueled by negative public perception.

Producers face added certification costs and shifting compliance targets that are difficult to meet without shared standards or coordinated lobbying. Consequently, palm oil is gradually being replaced in niche markets by alternatives with better sustainability branding, even if those alternatives have comparable or higher environmental footprints^[111].

5.7. Consequences for Smallholders and Equity

Lack of a unified narrative also harms smallholders, who constitute over 40% of palm oil producers in Indonesia and Malaysia^[112]. These farmers often lack access to information and support networks necessary to align with sustainability goals or defend their livelihoods publicly.

In the absence of inclusive communication strategies, smallholders become invisible in the international debate, which is instead dominated by multinational voices and foreign NGOs. Their marginalisation reinforces the perception of palm oil as an extractive industry controlled by elites, rather than a sector that sustains millions of rural livelihoods^[113].

The literature calls for inclusion of smallholder narratives through cooperatives, community-led media, and participatory certification models to ensure fair representation^[114]. Without this, equity and justice remain elusive goals in the sustainability discourse.

This systematic review clearly demonstrates that the absence of a unified narrative among palm oil stakeholders amplifies the power and longevity of negative global campaigns, resulting in tangible economic, reputational, and policy setbacks. The findings suggest that a cohesive, inclusive, and proactive communication strategy backed by cross-sectoral alignment and data transparency is critical to shaping a more balanced global discourse.

Practically, this means building a collaborative communication framework that incorporates smallholders, industry associations, environmental groups, and government agencies^[115]. The framework should agree on common terminologies, goals, and media strategies, possibly supported by an independent communication task force or knowledge hub.

For future research, there is a need to explore how digital platforms and artificial intelligence (AI)-driven narrative monitoring tools can be used to identify misinformation patterns and develop counter-narratives in real time. Additionally, a deeper investigation into successful branding

models in other sectors could offer valuable insights for the palm oil industry's communication strategy.

If palm oil stakeholders remain divided in narrative construction, the global discourse will continue to be shaped by actors external to the production context, often with minimal accountability. Unified narrative-building is not just about reputational management, but about sovereignty, equity, and long-term sustainability.

Recent analyses have highlighted several operational shortcomings in the palm oil sector's campaign management in response to global negative narratives. Content audits of stakeholder websites and social media platforms reveal an overwhelming prevalence of fragmented messaging, with less than one-fifth of sampled sites presenting integrated narratives that reconcile sustainability, economic, and regulatory themes. Moreover, media monitoring revealed that digital

outreach from producing countries often fails to achieve consistent reach or resonance, primarily due to asynchronous posting schedules, a lack of emotional storytelling, and the inflexible use of technical jargon that alienates international audiences. Comparative analytics of campaign effectiveness highlight that centralised platforms administered by industry consortia or independent bodies deliver higher message consistency and audience engagement, as measured by increased positive sentiment scores and reduced misinformation propagation on Twitter, Instagram, and news aggregators. Despite this, many palm oil campaigns remain siloed or redundant, indicating considerable inefficiency in resource allocation and narrative amplification efforts.

Table 1 summarises the above discussion about outputs, platforms, opportunities, and impacts of each issue accordingly.

Table 1. Key Strategies of the Palm Oil Industry in Response to Global Negative Campaigns.

Issues	Output/Impact
Fragmentation of Stakeholder Messaging	Output: Development of unified messaging frameworks and centralized communication task forces that harmonize narratives across producers, processors, government agencies, and certification bodies. Platforms: Multi-stakeholder coordination councils, integrated digital communication hubs, and cross-sector dialogue platforms. Opportunities: Creation of shared terminology standards, synchronized campaign timing, and aligned policy advocacy positions. Impact: Reduced message contradictions (from 72% fragmentation to coordinated positioning), enhanced collective credibility, and stronger counter-narrative capacity against external criticism. The implementation of joint communication protocols can increase message consistency by up to 80%, according to recent industry analyses.
Policy and Regulatory Communication Misalignment	Output: Establishment of diplomatic coordination mechanisms between ASEAN-level sustainability discourse and national economic sovereignty messaging. Platforms: Government-industry liaison committees, trade diplomacy channels, and bilateral policy coordination forums. Opportunities: Harmonized responses to EU regulations (EUDR), synchronized WTO dispute strategies, and unified sustainability benchmark communications. Impact: Enhanced negotiation effectiveness in international trade forums, reduced policy contradiction rates (from 72% to coordinated responses), and stronger collective bargaining power against protectionist measures. Coordinated policy messaging has shown 34% improvement in international regulatory outcomes.
Geopolitical Dynamics of the Palm Oil Narrative	Output: Strategic diplomatic alliances such as the Indonesia-Malaysia Palm Oil Council and coordinated responses to trade discrimination. Platforms: Bilateral trade councils, ASEAN agricultural cooperation frameworks, and South-South diplomatic networks. Opportunities: Counter-narratives to neo-colonial framing, unified position against discriminatory trade barriers, and alternative market development initiatives. Impact: Reduced dependence on Western markets through diversified trade relationships (18% export diversion to China and India since 2023), strengthened regional cooperation, and enhanced sovereignty in sustainability standard-setting. Joint diplomatic initiatives have improved producer countries' bargaining power by 25% in international trade negotiations.
Media Representation and Global Framing Bias	Output: Proactive media engagement strategies, multilingual digital content creation, and systematic counter-narrative deployment. Platforms: International press relations, social media campaigns, documentary productions, and academic publication initiatives. Opportunities: Reframing palm oil as a development solution, highlighting socioeconomic contributions, and promoting balanced journalism through media partnerships. Impact: Reduced negative sentiment scores in Western media (target improvement from -0.62 to balanced coverage), increased visibility of sustainability achievements, and enhanced global narrative balance. Strategic media engagement has shown potential for 40% improvement in brand reputation indexes.

Table 1. *Cont.*

Issues	Output/Impact
Misinformation and Public Perception Management	Output: Real-time misinformation monitoring systems, fact-checking initiatives, and educational campaign deployment. Platforms: Digital monitoring tools, social media engagement platforms, consumer education websites, and influencer partnership networks. Opportunities: Blockchain-based transparency systems, AI-driven narrative monitoring, and proactive consumer education through interactive platforms. Impact: Reduced misinformation circulation by 25%, increased consumer awareness of certified sustainable options (from 22% to target 60% awareness), and enhanced public trust through transparent communication. Companies implementing proactive digital strategies report an 80% increase in consumer engagement.
Corporate Communication and CSR Narratives	Output: Integrated sustainability reporting, authentic community storytelling, and a third-party verified communication framework. Platforms: Corporate sustainability portals, community engagement platforms, certification disclosure systems, and stakeholder dialogue forums. Opportunities: Authentic smallholder narrative integration, local community voice amplification, and culturally contextualized storytelling approaches. Impact: Enhanced consumer trust (target increase from 28% to 50% trust in corporate claims), improved ESG performance recognition, and strengthened social license to operate. Authentic community-integrated campaigns achieve a 30% improvement in brand reputation.
Role of Multi-stakeholder Platforms	Output: Strengthened RSPO governance, enhanced smallholder participation mechanisms, and expanded platform inclusivity initiatives. Platforms: RSPO multi-stakeholder councils, Tropical Forest Alliance frameworks, regional certification bodies, and smallholder cooperative networks. Opportunities: Increased smallholder representation (from <10% to target 25% participation), democratized decision-making processes, and enhanced platform legitimacy through inclusive governance. Impact: Improved stakeholder trust and participation, enhanced credibility of certification, and strengthened collective advocacy capacity. RSPO-certified plantations have grown 34% since 2018, demonstrating platform effectiveness in driving industry transformation.

5.8. Limitations of the Study

This study acknowledges several limitations that warrant careful consideration when interpreting the findings and their broader applicability. Methodologically, the reliance on a single database (ScienceDirect) for literature retrieval may have constrained the comprehensiveness of the review, potentially excluding relevant studies indexed in other major academic databases such as Web of Science, PubMed, or Google Scholar, which could limit the scope of identified themes and reduce the diversity of perspectives captured in the analysis. The temporal restriction to articles published between 2020 and 2025, while ensuring contemporary relevance, may have inadvertently excluded foundational or seminal works that could provide critical historical context for understanding the evolution of stakeholder communication strategies in the palm oil sector. Additionally, the focus on open-access publications, though practical for accessibility, may have introduced a selection bias by excluding high-quality research published in subscription-based journals, potentially skewing the findings toward specific types of research outputs or institutional affiliations. The thematic categorisation process, despite following systematic approaches, remains inherently subjective and could be influenced by the researcher's inter-

pretation, particularly in distinguishing overlapping themes such as stakeholder fragmentation and policy misalignment. Furthermore, the study's emphasis on Western and Southeast Asian contexts may limit the generalizability of findings to other palm oil-producing regions in Africa or Latin America, where different socio-political dynamics and communication challenges may exist. The absence of primary data collection through interviews or surveys with actual stakeholders constrains the depth of understanding about real-world implementation challenges and the practical feasibility of proposed unified narrative frameworks. Finally, the rapid evolution of digital communication platforms and AI-driven misinformation campaigns means that some findings regarding social media dynamics and public perception management may become outdated relatively quickly, necessitating ongoing research to maintain relevance in this fast-changing landscape.

5.9. Recommendations for Improved Communication Strategies

5.9.1. Unified Messaging Through Collaborative Task Forces

A clear first step in addressing fragmented communication is the establishment of a dedicated task force or

knowledge hub composed of representatives from producers, smallholder cooperatives, industry associations, government agencies, and independent certifiers. This coordinated body should co-develop a shared lexicon and key messaging templates that account for the diversity of stakeholder perspectives, thereby resolving terminology gaps and aligning campaign objectives. Initiatives such as the RSPO demonstrate the value of multi-actor forums but require deeper integration of grassroots voices and transparent governance practices to achieve true narrative convergence.

5.9.2. Enhancing Data Access and Transparency

To build trust and credibility, stakeholders in the palm oil industry must enhance the accessibility, interoperability, and transparency of industry data. The adoption of open-access data repositories, blockchain-enabled traceability systems, and real-time monitoring dashboards is recommended, facilitating the consistent dissemination of verified progress on sustainability milestones, smallholder support programs, and impact metrics. Empirical evidence suggests that direct public access to robust datasets and clear reporting standards reduces scepticism and mitigates the effects of misinformation.

5.9.3. Building Centralised and Digital Communication Platforms

Industry stakeholders should invest in centralised digital platforms that serve as consolidated sources of fact-based information, stakeholder stories, and campaign assets. These platforms should be actively managed using digital engagement tools, such as social listening software and sentiment analysis, as well as micro-influencer partnerships, to dynamically adjust messaging in response to emerging threats or public concerns. Integrated multilingual content is vital for targeting global audiences and bridging cultural divides. Lessons from successful branding in the dairy and coffee sectors highlight the necessity of proactive digital diplomacy and audience segmentation for reputation recovery.

5.9.4. Stakeholder Alignment and Conflict Resolution

Conflicts between actors over standards, certification, and narrative emphasis must be resolved through participatory consensus-building processes. Regular stakeholder workshops, cross-sectoral roundtables, and joint campaign

planning are essential for harmonising policy positions, resolving trade-offs, and presenting a united front in international policy arenas. Incorporating the lived experiences and success stories of smallholders can humanise the industry and rebalance the discourse away from elite-driven or solely corporate perspectives.

5.9.5. Proactive Consumer Engagement and Trust Restoration

Low consumer trust remains a persistent obstacle. Campaigns should prioritise transparency, authenticity, and proactive educational outreach. Leveraging consumer-focused digital tools—interactive guides, explainer videos, social media Q&A sessions, and collaborative content with reputable NGOs—can clarify the realities of sustainable palm oil production and correct misperceptions. Third-party endorsements from independent auditors, academic researchers, and civil society organisations should be showcased to strengthen claims and build legitimacy.

6. Conclusions

This systematic literature review reveals that the persistence and strength of global negative campaigns against palm oil are strongly correlated with the lack of a unified, coherent narrative among key stakeholders within the industry. The absence of synchronised messaging, especially between producers, processors, exporters, governments, and certification bodies, has created narrative gaps that transnational advocacy groups and protectionist policies in consumer countries readily exploit. As a result, the fragmented discourse surrounding palm oil has contributed to reputational vulnerability on the global stage, regardless of improvements in sustainability, certification, or emissions reduction practices.

The reviewed studies consistently demonstrate that the power of consistent communication significantly shapes international public perception. While the European Union, the United States, and other importing regions continue to escalate regulatory scrutiny against palm oil, industry actors from major producing countries have failed to present a cohesive counter-narrative that emphasises the sector's socio-economic contributions, scientific progress in sustainability, and measurable environmental gains. This fragmentation has not only amplified misinformation but also undermined trust and credibility in public-facing dialogues.

The findings underscore the critical role of communication strategy as a core component of sustainability governance. A harmonised narrative rooted in evidence, endorsed across the supply chain, and tailored for international audiences emerges as an essential instrument to mitigate negative stereotyping, promote transparency, and reframe palm oil as a responsible global commodity. Studies further suggest that coordinated stakeholder messaging must be supported by credible metrics, proactive engagement in policy forums, and multilingual digital diplomacy to challenge persistent biases effectively.

Therefore, the literature indicates that future success in countering negative campaigns will depend less on isolated improvements in sustainability practices and more on the collective ability of stakeholders to align messaging, standardise value-based narratives, and project them consistently across geopolitical boundaries. Without such strategic alignment, the palm oil industry risks continued vulnerability to regulatory exclusion, consumer rejection, and reputational decline, regardless of factual progress made on the ground.

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