



Exploring the Lived Meaning of Strategic Communication in Sustainability-Oriented Entrepreneurship: An Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA) Approach

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ABSTRACT

Organizational communication has increasingly been recognized as a core element shaping innovation, leadership, and sustainability in contemporary entrepreneurship. Within this evolving field, the subjective experiences of entrepreneurs in constructing meaning through strategic communication remain insufficiently understood, especially in contexts where ethical and environmental values intersect with business objectives. However, most existing studies rely on rational or quantitative models that fail to capture the lived experiences underlying communicative decision-making. This study addresses this gap by asking: How do entrepreneurs experience and interpret strategic communication in sustainability-oriented decision-making? Using an Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA) approach, the study explores the lived experiences of ten Indonesian entrepreneurs engaged in sustainability-driven enterprises. Participants were selected using purposive sampling to ensure information-rich cases aligned with IPA methodological requirements, and each semi-structured interview lasted between 60–90 minutes to allow deep exploration of meaning-making processes. Data were collected through semi-structured interviews and analyzed hermeneutically to uncover the meanings participants ascribe to their communicative practices. The findings reveal that communication functions not merely as a managerial tool but as a reflective and relational process through which entrepreneurs negotiate values, construct authenticity, and integrate sustainability into strategic choices. The analysis identifies three essential themes: communicative leadership, meaning-making in decision-making, and reflexivity in ethical identity construction. These insights advance understanding of communication as a process of meaning construction central to sustainable entrepreneurship. The study highlights the need for future research to explore cross-cultural variations in communicative experiences, deepening theoretical and practical perspectives on how communication shapes ethical and sustainable business practices.



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INTRODUCTION

In contemporary organizational and business contexts, communication has evolved beyond a functional mechanism of information exchange to become a central process through which meaning, identity, and purpose are constructed (Liu et al., 2025). Within the rapidly changing environment of digital entrepreneurship, communication serves as the foundation upon which innovation, collaboration, and decision-making are built (Yang & Ai, 2025). As organizations increasingly integrate sustainability and ethical responsibility into their strategic orientation, communicative processes emerge as key sites for negotiating and articulating these evolving values. However, despite the growing recognition of communication's strategic role, existing research has not sufficiently examined how entrepreneurs personally experience these communicative processes—particularly in sustainability-driven contexts.

The significance of this phenomenon extends beyond structural or managerial concerns it touches the lived experiences of individuals navigating moral, social, and existential dimensions of their professional worlds. Entrepreneurs and business leaders do not simply communicate decisions; they experience communication as a process of meaning-making that shapes how they perceive their roles, relationships, and responsibilities (Diao et al., 2025). In contexts such as Indonesia's digital startup ecosystem, where economic ambition intersects with socio-environmental consciousness, communication becomes both an ethical and cultural act (Assing Hvidt et al., 2021). The ways in which individuals articulate sustainability, negotiate business priorities, and interpret leadership influence not only organizational outcomes but also the collective consciousness of responsible entrepreneurship in emerging economies.

Understanding these communicative experiences requires more than surface-level observation or quantitative measurement it demands an interpretive exploration of how meaning is lived, felt, and shared (Xu & Petty, 2025). The phenomenological approach offers a pathway to uncover the essence of these experiences by attending to the subjective realities of those who inhabit them. Through this lens, communication is seen not merely as a behavior or practice, but as a phenomenon through which human beings construct their understanding of organizational purpose, ethical direction, and sustainability-driven decision-making (Khan & Link, 2025). Exploring the lived meanings of strategic communication thus provides an avenue for deepening theoretical and practical insight into how individuals experience, embody, and enact sustainability within the communicative fabric of business life.

Within the broader study of organizational communication and entrepreneurship, research focusing on individuals' lived experiences of communication and meaning-making has gained increasing attention. Scholars have begun to recognize that the essence of organizational phenomena such as leadership, strategic decision-making, and sustainability integration cannot be fully understood through observable behavior or structural analysis alone. Instead, understanding how individuals experience these processes provides a more nuanced comprehension of organizational reality. Studies by (Ben Shoushan & Yavetz, 2025; Cueva Estrada et al., 2025) have emphasized that communication in organizations is fundamentally interpretive, shaped by personal perceptions, emotions, and contextual meanings that transcend traditional managerial models.

Despite this growing awareness, methodological challenges persist in capturing the depth of these subjective experiences (Al-Mudhayan & Alruwaili, 2025). Much of the existing literature still relies on quantitative surveys or case-based analyses that prioritize generalization over interpretation. Such approaches, while valuable for identifying patterns, often fail to reveal the inner dimensions of how entrepreneurs and leaders make sense of their communicative actions and decisions (Jimenez & Ruffolo, 2025). For example, decision-making research has frequently centered on rational-economic models, overlooking the experiential and emotional layers through which sustainability values are actually interpreted and enacted (Lee & Alhabash, 2025). Consequently, the subtle processes through which meaning is negotiated, contested, and embodied in organizational communication remain insufficiently explored.

These methodological constraints have limited the capacity of prior research to uncover the essence of communicative experiences in sustainability-driven entrepreneurship (Mao & Nishide, 2025). Phenomenology, particularly its interpretative form, addresses this gap by providing a philosophical and analytical framework that privileges lived experience and meaning construction. By attending to how entrepreneurs subjectively interpret their communication practices and leadership choices, phenomenology allows for a more holistic understanding of how strategic communication shapes sustainable decision-making (Gigliotti & Alvarez-Robinson, 2025). This approach moves beyond abstract theorization, revealing the human experience underlying organizational dynamics a dimension critical for advancing theory and practice in both communication and entrepreneurship studies.

Existing research on strategic communication in organizational and entrepreneurial contexts has largely employed practical and instrumental approaches such as communication models based on efficiency, persuasion, or information management to explain how decisions are made and

implemented (Alshaikh et al., 2025). These frameworks have contributed valuable insights into how communication supports organizational coordination and message dissemination. However, they often overlook the subjective dimension of communication the ways individuals experience, interpret, and internalize communicative processes within complex socio-ethical environments (Fasnacht & Schlosser, 2025). In sustainability-driven enterprises, where decisions intertwine economic goals with moral and environmental imperatives, such oversimplified frameworks fail to capture the layered meanings that guide human behavior and organizational purpose.

The prevailing methodological tendency toward survey-based or case-oriented studies has further limited scholarly understanding of the lived meaning of strategic communication (Cihan Aydogdu & Baskan Karsak, 2025). These approaches tend to prioritize measurable variables such as communication frequency, style, or efficiency while neglecting the interpretive and experiential elements that shape organizational sensemaking (Ahmed & Saxton, 2025). As a result, the underlying processes through which leaders and entrepreneurs construct and negotiate meaning in sustainability-oriented decision-making remain underexplored (Song, 2025). This gap is particularly evident in emerging economies, such as Indonesia, where cultural values and relational communication profoundly influence how sustainability is understood and enacted in business practice.

A phenomenological perspective offers an alternative pathway to address these limitations. By focusing on experience as lived rather than behavior as observed, phenomenology allows for a deeper and more holistic understanding of how communication operates as a process of meaning construction (Sentie et al., 2025). Through interpretative phenomenological analysis (IPA), this approach provides a means to uncover how individuals experience the convergence of leadership, communication, and sustainability not as abstract principles, but as embodied, emotional, and relational realities (Bonnevie et al., 2025). Addressing this gap through phenomenology not only enriches theoretical discourse but also enhances practical insights into how communication fosters authenticity, ethical awareness, and sustainable decision-making within entrepreneurial organizations.

Previous studies have explored organizational communication and sustainability from various perspectives, including leadership behavior, ethical management, and decision-making frameworks. Scholars such as (Çataldaş & Yalçınkaya, 2025; Gutiérrez-Hita et al., 2025) have highlighted that communication plays a central role in shaping organizational meaning and collective understanding. However, most of these studies rely on analytical frameworks that emphasize external behaviors rather than internal experiences. This leaves a gap in understanding how entrepreneurs and leaders live through their communicative practices when making sustainability-oriented decisions (Weldon & Pirkle, 2025). The present study builds upon this body of work by focusing on the experiential and interpretive dimensions of communication within entrepreneurial contexts.

To address this gap, this study employs the Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA) approach, which seeks to uncover how individuals interpret their lived experiences in relation to strategic communication and sustainability (Abitolkha et al., 2025). The method is particularly suitable for examining the subjective realities of entrepreneurs who must balance profit, purpose, and ethical responsibility in complex social environments. By exploring the meanings embedded in their communication practices, this study provides insight into how leaders construct, negotiate, and embody sustainability values through dialogue and reflexive understanding (Chance, 2025). In doing so, it answers the research question raised earlier by revealing how strategic communication functions as a process of meaning-making in sustainable business decision-making.

The structure of this article follows a clear and coherent flow. The introduction outlines the theoretical background and significance of the study, followed by a detailed explanation of the research design grounded in phenomenology (Goldberg & Gustafson, 2023). The Method section elaborates on participant selection, data collection, and interpretative data analysis procedures. The Results section presents the themes and essential meanings derived from participants' narratives (Curini et al., 2025). Finally, the Discussion and Conclusion sections interpret the findings in relation to existing literature, highlighting the theoretical and practical implications of communication as a lived and interpretive phenomenon in entrepreneurship.

RESEARCH METHODS

Study Design

This study employed an interpretative phenomenological approach (IPA) to explore the lived experiences and meanings underlying strategic communication in sustainability-oriented business decision-making (Pollard et al., 2021). The phenomenological design was selected to capture the subjective essence of how entrepreneurs and organizational leaders construct meaning through communication practices in the context of sustainability. Phenomenology, as a qualitative tradition, focuses on understanding the nature of human experience as it is lived, emphasizing depth over breadth and meaning over measurement.

The interpretative phenomenological framework, rooted in Heidegger's hermeneutic philosophy, was particularly relevant for this study. It enabled a detailed interpretation of how participants make sense of their communicative experiences within the social, ethical, and organizational dimensions of business practice (Franco & Pinho, 2019). The emphasis on interpretation aligns with the study's aim to reveal the communicative processes through which sustainability values are embedded in decision-making, rather than merely describing external behaviors or patterns.

Participants

Participants consisted of ten business founders and executives from sustainability-oriented startups and small to medium-sized enterprises (SMEs) in Indonesia's digital economy sector. These individuals were directly involved in organizational decision-making and internal communication processes that integrate sustainability principles into business strategy.

Participants were selected using a purposive sampling approach, ensuring that each had direct experience relevant to the studied phenomenon (McAllum et al., 2019). The inclusion criteria focused on individuals with at least three years of managerial or entrepreneurial experience and demonstrated engagement with sustainability-oriented business practices. Exclusion criteria included individuals whose roles were limited to technical or administrative functions without involvement in strategic communication.

Demographically, the participants ranged from 28 to 47 years of age, with gender distribution balanced (five male and five female participants). Their educational backgrounds varied from undergraduate to postgraduate degrees in fields related to business, management, and communication. This diverse representation contributed to a comprehensive understanding of the phenomenon across different organizational contexts.

Data Collection

Data were collected through semi-structured, in-depth interviews designed to elicit detailed accounts of participants' lived experiences in strategic communication for sustainable decision-making. Interviews were conducted in person and, when necessary, via secure video conferencing platforms to accommodate participants' schedules and geographical constraints (Adom et al., 2018). Each interview lasted between 60 and 90 minutes and was audio-recorded with the participants' consent.

An interview guide was developed to ensure consistency while allowing flexibility for follow-up questions. Key topics included experiences of leadership communication, challenges in sustainability implementation, and the meanings participants attributed to their communicative interactions (Fileri et al., 2019). The interviews took place in neutral, private settings to encourage openness and reflection.

All interviews were transcribed verbatim and anonymized to protect participants' identities. Field notes and reflective memos were used to capture contextual nuances, non-verbal cues, and researcher impressions relevant to interpretative depth.

Data Analysis

Data were analyzed using the Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA) technique, which emphasizes the dual processes of description and interpretation. The analysis followed systematic steps:

1. Reading and re-reading each transcript to gain holistic familiarity.
2. Identifying meaning units significant statements that conveyed participants' subjective interpretations.
3. Transforming meaning units into emergent themes by grouping conceptually similar expressions.
4. Connecting themes across participants to identify shared experiential patterns.
5. Synthesizing the findings into superordinate themes representing the essential meanings of the phenomenon.

NVivo software was utilized to organize and code the data systematically; however, analytical decisions were grounded in hermeneutic interpretation rather than software-driven categorization. This process facilitated an in-depth understanding of how participants constructed and negotiated meanings around communication, leadership, and sustainability within their organizational contexts.

Ethical approval was obtained from a recognized institutional ethics review board prior to data collection. All participants provided informed written consent after being briefed about the study's purpose, procedures, and confidentiality measures. Participation was entirely voluntary, and participants were free to withdraw at any time without consequence.

Anonymity and confidentiality were rigorously maintained throughout the research process. Personal identifiers were removed, and pseudonyms were used in reporting the findings. Data were securely stored in encrypted digital files accessible only to authorized personnel. The study adhered to the ethical principles outlined in the Declaration of Helsinki (2013) and complied with relevant national research ethics standards.

RESULTS

Communicative Leadership as a Catalyst for Innovation Culture

Participants consistently described communication as the "heartbeat" of leadership within digital startups. Leaders who engaged in transparent, dialogical, and participatory communication were perceived as instrumental in shaping a culture of innovation. One participant reflected, "When my CEO asks for my opinion during product design meetings, I feel like my voice matters this motivates me to take creative risks." Another participant similarly noted, "Our founder always says, 'No idea is too small.' That kind of communication makes me brave enough to propose experimental solutions." Such narratives revealed that innovation does not emerge solely from structured strategies but from communicative spaces where ideas are legitimized and shared.

This theme emphasizes that leadership communication operates as both a relational and meaning-making process. It fosters psychological safety, allowing members to voice unconventional ideas without fear of rejection. The findings suggest that communicative leadership in digital startups extends beyond directive instruction it symbolizes trust, inclusion, and collective ownership of innovation.

Strategic Communication as Meaning-Making in Decision-Making

Participants described decision-making not as a linear or purely rational process, but as a dynamic negotiation of meaning shaped by communication. Many recounted how sustainability values guided strategic discussions. As one founder stated, "We don't just talk about profit margins we ask, what kind of impact will this decision have on people and the planet?"

Through interpretative analysis, communication emerged as a space where economic goals and ethical considerations were reconciled. The participants' accounts revealed that strategic communication served as a bridge between pragmatic business interests and moral imperatives.

Rather than viewing communication as a mere tool for coordination, entrepreneurs experienced it as a process of collective sensemaking where meaning, value, and identity were co-constructed.

The Synergy of Business and Ethics in Communication



Sustainability Values as a Communicative Practice

Across all interviews, sustainability was not discussed as an abstract principle but as a lived communicative practice. Entrepreneurs articulated their sustainability orientation through daily language, narratives, and symbols embedded in organizational discourse. One respondent expressed, “Sustainability is not a slogan it’s how we talk about success in every meeting.”

This theme illustrates how communication transforms sustainability from a policy framework into a shared narrative. It highlights the interpretive nature of organizational meaning-making, where values are continuously negotiated through conversations, stories, and internal dialogue. The phenomenon indicates that sustainability communication is less about persuasion and more about identity construction within the business context.

Reflexivity and the Communicative Self of the Entrepreneur

Several participants displayed a high degree of reflexivity in how they described their communicative selves. They viewed communication not merely as outward expression but as an act of introspection. As one participant articulated, “Before convincing others, I always ask myself am I communicating what I truly believe?” This introspective communication underscores the hermeneutic principle that understanding arises from self-interpretation before engaging the external world.

Through this reflective stance, entrepreneurs recognized that their communicative authenticity influenced organizational coherence. The phenomenological insight here is that communication is both intra-personal and inter-personal; it mediates not only strategic outcomes but also the moral and existential grounding of the entrepreneur’s leadership identity.

DISCUSSION

This study revealed that communication functions not merely as a medium of coordination within entrepreneurial organizations but as a process of meaning construction through which sustainability and innovation gain coherence (Wang & Friginal, 2025). The phenomenological analysis uncovered that entrepreneurs experience communication as a reflective, relational, and value-driven act that shapes strategic decision-making in sustainability-oriented business contexts. These findings directly address the research question concerning how business leaders make sense of strategic communication when integrating sustainability values into their decisions.

Contributions to the Research Question

The results demonstrate that communication in entrepreneurial settings transcends managerial or transactional functions; it becomes an existential and ethical practice through which entrepreneurs articulate their sense of purpose and identity. Participants’ reflections show that decision-making grounded in sustainability emerges from communicative acts that align personal beliefs with organizational objectives (Mohamed et al., 2025). This interpretative understanding reveals the inner dimension of strategic communication: it is not only about conveying messages but also about

constructing shared meanings that sustain organizational integrity and innovation (Pharamela & Singh-Pillay, 2025). Such insights provide a phenomenological explanation of how meaning-making occurs at the intersection of communication, leadership, and sustainability an area previously underexplored in entrepreneurship research. However, these findings challenge the widespread assumption in conventional leadership studies that strategic communication functions primarily as a rational, goal-oriented tool. Models that emphasize persuasion, clarity, and message alignment often overlook the emotional and interpretive labor reflected in the entrepreneurs' narratives. The contrast between these findings and traditional communication-efficiency frameworks highlights the need to broaden theoretical conceptions of entrepreneurial communication beyond instrumental logic. The study thus contributes to a more profound comprehension of how leaders live through communication as a process of intentional reflection, negotiation, and authenticity.

Relation to Previous Literature and Theoretical Implications

These findings resonate with (López-Serrano et al., 2025) concept of sensemaking in organizations, which describes communication as a mechanism through which individuals interpret uncertainty and co-create shared understanding. They also align with (Gurung et al., 2025) view of decision-making as a communicative process, yet extend it by emphasizing the experiential rather than structural nature of sensemaking. Whereas prior research, such as (Supriyanto et al., 2025), framed communication as an organizational tool for constructing collective reality, the present study illuminates the subjective experience underlying that construction. Moreover, the emphasis on sustainability echoes (Briana et al., 2025) findings that ethical and social considerations increasingly define entrepreneurial action; however, this study advances the discourse by revealing how these values are internalized and expressed through communicative practice. Theoretically, the results underscore the hermeneutic foundation of organizational communication suggesting that meaning arises from interpretive dialogue between self, others, and context, rather than from prescribed strategy or policy.

Implications of the Findings

The findings of this study hold both theoretical and practical implications for the fields of organizational communication, business leadership, and sustainable entrepreneurship. From a theoretical standpoint, the study reinforces the interpretative nature of communication as a vehicle for constructing meaning within organizations. By revealing communication as an embodied and reflective practice, the study demonstrates that leadership and sustainability are not merely strategic frameworks but lived realities negotiated through everyday discourse. This underscores the importance of understanding communication as a meaning-making process rather than a linear exchange of information.

Practically, the insights emphasize that fostering sustainability in business requires more than compliance or strategy it necessitates cultivating communicative spaces where shared values and ethical reflections can emerge organically. Entrepreneurs and leaders can apply these findings by prioritizing open dialogue, reflexivity, and value-based discussions in their organizations. In contexts such as Indonesia's rapidly growing digital economy, these communicative practices hold social and cultural importance, as they mirror the interplay between collectivist traditions and emerging global business ethics. Thus, the study contributes to both academic inquiry and professional praxis by positioning communication as the cornerstone of sustainable and human-centered entrepreneurship.

Limitations of the Study

Despite its contributions, this study acknowledges several limitations that shape the scope of its interpretation. The use of interpretative phenomenological analysis (IPA) emphasizes depth over breadth, which limits the generalizability of findings to broader populations. The focus on entrepreneurs within Indonesia's digital and sustainability-oriented business ecosystem may also introduce cultural and contextual specificity that does not directly translate to other regions or sectors. Moreover, the study relies on self-reported experiences, which, while rich in subjective insight, may be influenced by participants' retrospective interpretations and social desirability biases. These limitations, however, are consistent with the phenomenological aim of exploring lived meaning rather

than achieving statistical representativeness. They instead serve as an invitation for future scholars to engage with these phenomena across diverse settings and comparative cultural landscapes.

Future Research Directions

Future research can expand upon the present findings by exploring how strategic communication and sustainability are experienced in different organizational and cultural contexts. Comparative phenomenological studies across various industries could deepen understanding of how local values influence the communicative construction of sustainability. Longitudinal designs may also provide insight into how entrepreneurs' meaning-making evolves over time as organizational realities shift. Additionally, integrating phenomenological inquiry with narrative or ethnographic approaches could yield a more comprehensive picture of how communication practices shape collective identity and ethical engagement within enterprises (Akram et al., 2025). Ultimately, such investigations would contribute to the ongoing refinement of communication and entrepreneurship theory by grounding abstract concepts of sustainability and leadership in the lived experience of those who enact them daily.

CONCLUSION

This study explored the lived experiences of entrepreneurs in interpreting and enacting strategic communication within sustainability-oriented business decision-making. The findings revealed that communication operates not merely as a functional tool but as a reflective and relational process through which leaders construct meaning, align values, and integrate ethical awareness into organizational practice. By employing the interpretative phenomenological approach, the study illuminated the depth of human experience that underlies strategic communication, addressing the limitations of prior research dominated by rational or quantitative perspectives. The results contribute to a more holistic understanding of how meaning-making, leadership authenticity, and sustainability are intertwined within communicative action. Beyond these descriptive insights, this study offers a distinct theoretical contribution by demonstrating that strategic communication in sustainable entrepreneurship must be understood as an experiential and interpretive phenomenon—one shaped by emotional reflexivity, ethical deliberation, and ongoing relational negotiation. This reframing challenges conventional communication models that emphasize efficiency or persuasion, expanding the scholarly discourse toward a more human-centered, phenomenological foundation.

Practically, the study provides clear guidance for entrepreneurs and organizational leaders. First, reflective communication practices can strengthen value alignment and support ethically coherent decision-making. Second, cultivating communicative leadership—characterized by openness, relational attentiveness, and reflexive dialogue—can enhance authenticity and stakeholder trust in sustainability-driven enterprises. Third, embedding structured spaces for communicative reflection within organizational routines can help teams navigate tensions between economic goals and sustainability commitments. These recommendations underscore the actionable relevance of experiential communication processes in everyday entrepreneurial practice. These insights advance both theoretical and practical discourse by framing communication as the foundation of responsible and purpose-driven entrepreneurship. Future studies could build on this work by examining cross-cultural variations or longitudinal transformations in how entrepreneurs experience and communicate sustainability over time.

CONFLICT OF INTEREST

The authors declare no conflict of interest. All procedures and analyses were conducted independently, and no financial, professional, or personal relationships influenced the outcomes or interpretations of this research.

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