

Rethinking Leadership beyond Hierarchy in Sustainable Communication Contexts

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Abstract *Sustainable communication campaigns are increasingly operating in complex environments. In practice, these projects bring together experts from different fields – strategic, creative, ethical, executive. In turbulent and challenging times, the network expands even further. At the same time, organizations face regulatory pressure, reputational risks and growing public expectations. As a result, communication becomes a space where multiple professional actors need to continuously align perspectives and decisions. These dynamics raise an important question about how leadership functions in complex settings.*

Traditional leadership models focus on clearly recognized authority, concentrated influence and individual role. In contrast, complex communication calls for a rethink beyond formal roles and hierarchy.

The analytical design is informed by qualitative, interpretive approach based on semi-structured interviews with communication professionals.

The research perspectives are based on key theoretical pillars - leadership transformation from role to process, shared leadership as a phenomenon and communication as a coordinating mechanism.

The findings highlight that the influence moved between actors, depending on the situation, the type of expertise and the level of risk.

The paper offers theoretical insights into leadership in creative and communication-intensive contexts and provides practical implications for business leaders seeking to foster sustainable communication strategies under conditions of uncertainty.

Keywords: shared leadership, corporate sustainability, organizational processes, corporate communication, multidisciplinary collaboration.

Introduction

Periods of uncertainty and rapid change increasingly challenge established leadership approaches in corporate and brand communication.

Developing consistent and credible messages under pressure is a key leadership challenge. As it is directly related to challenging times in which business operate today. The growing emphasis on sustainability has expanded the scope of corporate and brand communication beyond short-term reputation management, placing stronger demands on consistency, ethical sensitivity, social responsibility and coherence between internal organizational values and external messages.

In such conditions organizations need to integrate diverse forms of expertise, including strategic, creative, ethical and commercial perspectives, to respond effectively to complex challenges. Implementing sustainability-oriented communication strategies in turbulent times requires organizations to simultaneously respond to tensions that preserve long-term brand integrity and stakeholder demands. Strategic leaders are increasingly expected to focus on critical resources that support the organization’s sustainable development over time (Angelov, 2025).

The insights from shared leadership research offer a relevant analytical perspective to examine how leaders respond is enacted across multiple actors in sustainable- oriented projects. The study observes how leadership is implemented beyond hierarchical roles in difficult times and how shared leadership practices shape the development of brand communication and sustainable aims. Against this background, the study is guided by three research questions:

RQ1: How does leadership transform from individual toward more shared forms of coordination in sustainable communication?

RQ2: What kind of challenges contribute to the emergence of shared leadership across different areas of expertise and professionals in sustainability-oriented projects?

RQ3: How do hierarchical structures interact with shared leadership processes in sustainable communication projects?

Literature review

From Role-based leadership to leadership as a process

Traditional leadership is conceptualized as a role in which influence is based on vision of personal skills and qualities.

Scholars further demonstrate that leadership capacity is rarely concentrated in a single actor and addressing emerging challenges typically requires the integration of diverse forms of knowledge and expertise (Day et al.2004; Pearce & Conger, 2003).

As Wassenaar, Pearce and Lorinkova (2025) argue “leadership is not simply a position; it is a role to be player or a position to be field.” This shift provides the conceptual foundation for understanding leadership as a shared process emerging through ongoing coordination, negotiation and collective reflection. In response to contemporary organizational dynamics, leadership research has increasingly shifted toward process-oriented perspectives than emphasize interaction, relation dynamics, and collective influence. Empirical research also shows that shared leadership can generate added value, particularly in complex and uncertain business environments (Muller, Bodea & Radujkovic, 2013).

Shared leadership as a process phenomenon

Based on process-oriented perspectives, shared leadership is increasingly understood as a relational and dynamic phenomenon, rather than a predefined structural scheme.

Gichuhi (2021), on a systematic review of 43 peer-reviewed studies-defines shared leadership as an emergent phenomenon that unfolds through interaction, coordination, and collective meanings making. From this perspective leadership is not embedded in formal position but exercised distributed influence across multiple actors. The review highlights that shared leadership is dynamic and context dependent shaped by tasks independence and situation demands. Importantly, shared leadership does not imply equal participation but reflect evolving patterns of interaction and collaboration over time. By framing leadership as an ongoing social process, this perspective provides a strong theoretical basis for examining leadership beyond in complex organizational environments.

Shared leadership as a driver of team effectiveness

Shared leadership is often associated with improved team effectiveness.

Wu and Cormican (2021), show that shared leadership is positively related to task performance, team viability, and overall effectiveness, suggest that leadership function can be distributed across

team rather than concentrate in a single role. Team effectiveness is commonly understood both performance outcomes and capacity to sustain collaboration over time (D’Innocenzo, Mathieu & Kukenberger, 2016).

At the same time, these effects are not uniform. Wu and Cormican (2021), demonstrate that the relationship between shared leadership and team effectiveness varies across the project lifecycle, with stronger effects in the earlier stages of collaboration. Complementing this perspective, Bai and he (2025) introduce a “a double-edged sword” view, suggesting that shared leadership can enable and constrain constructive employee behaviors such as voice.

Sustainability as continuous practice in corporate communication

Sustainability communication projects require the integration of diverse forms of expertise – including strategic, ethical, legal, technical and communications knowledge.

Many organizations have a constant need to acquire, assimilate, update and develop new knowledge, access to information, resources, and various services (Angelov, 2022). Research on sustainable project management emphasizes that such initiatives involve integrating environmental, social, and economic considerations throughout the project life cycle and require coordination across multiple stakeholders and professional perspectives (Kiani Mavi, Standing, & Abdi, 2021).

As a result, sustainability initiatives develop in multidisciplinary processes characterized by continuous negotiation, interpretation, and coordination. At the same time, leadership research increasingly frames leadership as a relational phenomenon through which meanings, values, and directions are constructed (Crevani et al., 2010; Uhl-Bien, 2006). From this perspective, leadership is realized through interaction and communication, not just through formal authority. Communication, in turn, functions as a mechanism that translates abstract principles of sustainability into concrete organizational practices (Christensen et al., 2013).

The literature also shows that sustainability-oriented initiatives are inherently shaped by tensions and often develop in conditions of organizational turbulence. Studies highlight the constant tensions between competing organizational logics (Hahn et al., 2015; Cho et al., 2012). Organizations can engage in symbolic practices of sustainability to manage stakeholder perceptions (Cho et al., 2012). These tensions are not episodic but structural, requiring continuous interpretation, coordination, and adaptation.

This dynamic becomes even more pronounced in sustainability communication, reinforcing its role as a key arena where such tensions are negotiated and addressed, and highlighting the importance of leadership as a shared and process-oriented phenomenon.

Methodology

The study follows a qualitative, interpretive research design based on semi-structured interviews.

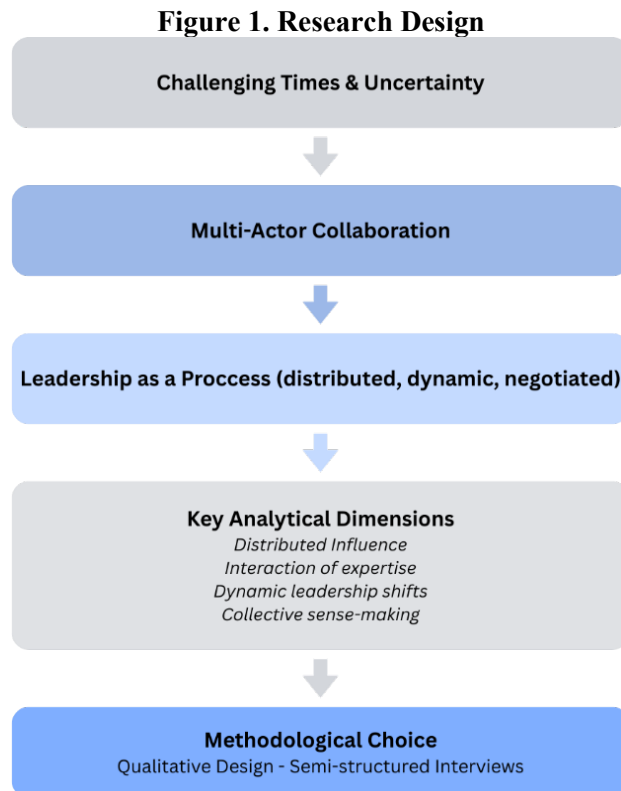
Participants were selected purposively from various fields and organizations involved in sustainable communication projects. The sample includes professionals from creative industries, marketing, corporate communications, brand management, human resources, media and public organizations with social missions. The diversity allows to explore leadership dynamics across different professional perspectives – including both internal and external communication context.

The analysis is organized around analytically defined clusters – group roles with similar functions in sustainable communication. The clusters are not formal structures, but clusters serve as a way to understand how leadership is enacted across areas of expertise and trace how leadership influence moves between them.

This approach examine leadership as a process and relational phenomenon, focusing on how coordination, decision-making and influence unfold in a complex and turbulent context. Shared leadership is treated as an analytical lens for understanding how leadership practices emerge, ship and are negotiated across multiple actors.

Sample and data collection

The final sample included 26 experienced professionals working in different communication roles- all involved in sustainability-oriented projects. Figure 1 shows the analytical logic and research design.



Source: Autors' own elaboration.

The data collection aimed to reflect the complexity of sustainable communication. The participants represented different organizations and various executive levels within hierarchical structures. Data were collected in January 2026. The interviews lasted between 40 and 75 minutes and were conducted online or face to face. All interviews were conducted in Bulgarian to ensure clarity and depth responses.

Table 1 presents an overview of the respondents included in the study. To ensure confidentiality, all participant data were anonymized and identified using from R1 to R26.

Table 1. Profile of respondents

Code	Age Range	Role	Type of organization
R1	45-50	Marketing Director	Retail company
R2	45-50	Chief Financial Officer	International business organization
R3	40-45	Global Communication Officer	International business organization
R4	40-45	Managing Director	Production house
R5	25-30	Agency Owner	Digital advertising agency
R6	30-35	Creative and Event manager	Freelance
R7	45-50	Agency Owner	PR agency
R8	30-35	PR consultant	Independent consultant
R9	40-45	Communication Manager	Fast-moving consumer goods (FMCG)
R10	20-25	Brand Executive	Industrial company
R11	35-40	Film Director	Creative Industry
R12	40-45	Head of sustainability projects	Edutainment organization
R13	46-50	Video Producer	Creative Industry
R14	45-45	Head of advertising department	Media National Coverage
R15	40-45	Event and sustainability project coordinator	Children Museum
R16	40-45	Creative Director	Media - Economic thematic TV channel
R17	30-35	Project Lead	Science and educational center
R18	30-35	Cameramen	Media National Coverage
R19	40-45	Event and sustainability project	Children Museum
R20	40-45	HR expert	International company
R21	45-50	HR manager	International company
R22	40-45	Video Editor	Creative industry
R23	40-45	Copywriter and concept developer	Creative industry
R24	35-40	Employer Branding and	Agency Co-Founder
R25	45-50	HR manager	Technological international holding
R26	45-50	Owner and managing director	Commercial company

Source: Authors' own data, based on semi-structured interviews.

The collected material provides the empirical basis for the analytical exploration of leadership practices in sustainability communication.

Analytical Clusters

The respondents were grouped into five clusters with regards to the research analysis and discussion. These clusters were not formed based on formal organizational structures, but on the type of role and influence the respondent has in the communication process. This approach follows the idea that leadership is not only connected to formal positions, written rules, and chain of command. It is considered as a rational and social process that emerges and develops through interaction between different people (Uhl-Bien, 2006). Research on shared leadership shows that leadership can be distributed between different people who contribute with their knowledge, skills and approaches and work together to achieve common goals (Carson, Tesluk, & Marrone, 2007; D'Innocenzo, Mathieu, & Kukenberger, 2016). In sustainability communication distributed leadership is considered as of high importance, as sustainable (communication) projects usually require knowledge from different fields and involve various stakeholders. In this respect some authors argue that leadership often happens across organizational and professional boundaries (Kiani Mavi, Standing, & Abdi, 2021). Furthermore, sustainability initiatives are often connected with tension, even potentials for conflicts and disputes. Organizations need to balance between different goals, such as economic performance and social responsibility. These tensions sometimes are continuously evolving and developing, which requires constant contribution and adoption

(Hahn et al., 2015). In this respect in sustainable communication leadership is considered not only about giving directions but also about interpretation, negotiation, and collaboration between followers and managers.

With regards to the analysis the empirical data from the qualitative research was structured into five analytical clusters. Each cluster represents a different position in the communication process and a different way in which leadership is being expressed:

- (1) Internal organizational actors – they include managers and professionals who are responsible for strategic decisions coordination and alignment of sustainability communication within the organisation (respondents R1, R2, R9, R10, R20, R21, R25, R26).
- (2) External consultants and agency professionals – they influence communication through expertise and advice. These respondents represent experts that are not integral part of the organizational structure (respondents R3, R5, R7, R8, R24).
- (3) Creative and production professionals – their contribution is connected to specific tasks and creative decisions during various campaign development and completion (respondents R4, R6, R11, R13, R22, R23).
- (4) Media actors – they influence how sustainability messages are presented to the public and play a role in shaping public understanding and legitimacy (respondents R14, R15, R16).
- (5) Social and sustainability experts – they focus on the social impact and work closely with specific groups, helping to ensure that communication is appropriate and responsible (R12, R17, R19).

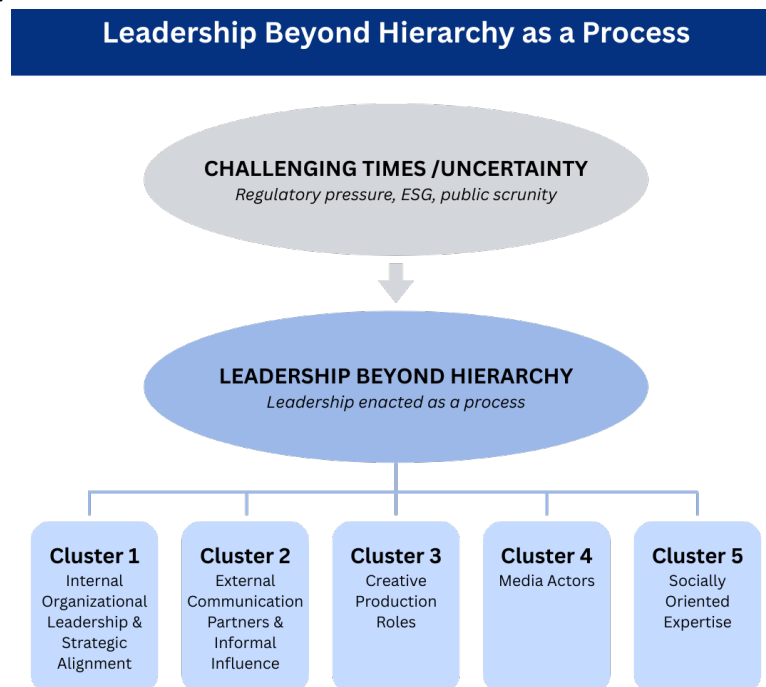


Figure 2. Leadership beyond hierarchy

Source: Authors 'contribution.

Figure 2 illustrates how challenges can redistribute leadership influence and create more horizontal forms of coordination.

Results and discussions

Internal Organizational Leadership and Strategic Alignment (IOL)

This section represents the analysis from the answers of the respondents of the first analytic cluster – the internal organizational actors.

The findings show that responsibility communication campaigns are shaped by significant complexity. The respondents explained that aligning strategy is not an easy task, and it often requires coordination between different departments such as marketing, communication, and HR. On the other hand, organizations face limited resources, changing regulations, and strong public expectations. Some respondents describe sustainability communication as a long and complicated process that needs continuous coordination and does not follow clear and defined standard models (respondents R2, R3, R24). Respondent R1 suggest that one of the main challenges is the need to balance between short term business goals and long-term sustainability commitment. Respondent R2 further explains that sometimes sustainability investments are competing with immediate business priorities while their results are difficult to measure using traditional performance indicators. This creates additional pressure for leadership decision-making. According to respondents R1 and R3 another important issue is the constant change in the ESG regulations. Organisations need to continuously interpret the new rules and to adapt their communication processes. This requires collaboration between different organizational functions and further increases the complexity and the risk of tension and stress. These findings are in line with previous research showing that organizations need to balance economic environmental and social goals at the same time (Hahn et al., 2015).

With regards to the competitive communication environment respondent R9 also highlights the risk of “green advertising” as there is a strong pressure to show visible sustainable actions that sometimes can lead to exaggeration or misalignment with what the organization declares and what they really do. Many representatives of the internal leaders are aware of these risks and they are trying to avoid them – respondents R1, R3, R9, R21, R24. Leadership was particularly evident at the interface between senior management decisions and operational communications processes, where marketing, communications and human resources professionals shared strategic commitments to translate vague ideas into ethically responsible practices that sometimes sound utopian (R1, R21, R24).

The respondents from the first analytical cluster argue that shared leadership does not replace hierarchy in full, but it rather changes how leadership works inside hierarchal structures (respondents R1, R3, R9, R24). Leadership becomes more distributed and flexible in response to uncertainty and complexity that is quite common for the organizational environment nowadays. Leadership is not based only on formal authority even though managers have access to strategic decisions and could utilize certain resources that follows their formal organizational role. Leadership is often practiced through coordination, discussion, and shared interpretation. Different departments and organizational structures work together to transform general sustainability ideas into real communication practices even when these ideas are not always clear or easy to be implemented.

These findings support the idea that leadership is a relational process that emerges and develops through the interaction between organizational actors, not only provoked by their formal roles (Uhl-Bien, 2006). It also supports previous research on shared leadership that shows that leadership can be distributed between people who contribute knowledge and coordinate actions together (Carson, Tesluk, & Marrone, 2007; D’Innocenzo, Mathieu, & Kukenberger, 2016).

External Communication Partners and Informal Leadership (ECP)

Text following discussion follows the answers of the respondents from the second analytical cluster, formed by external consultants and agency professionals. A solid group from the respondents explains that external communication partners (agencies and consultants) play an important role in sustainability communication projects (respondents R7, R8, R24). They describe their role as mediators between the organizational priorities and the communication highlights often shaping the strategic decisions even though they don't have the formal power or authority. They argue that their role, having a strong influence through their expertise, is in a way a bridge between the organizational goals and the communication practice. The respondents from the second analytical cluster argues that leadership is mainly expressed through advisory and interpretative work. For example, they could help for defining or redefining the communication goals, adjusting communication messages, selecting appropriate channels, and anticipating public reactions. They also support organizations in finding realistic solutions in uncertain and complex situations (respondents R4, R7, R24). The respondents explain that external partners often start important discussions within the organizational narrative. Sometimes they question decisions related to tone, timing, and even ethical aspects of the sustainable communication campaigns. In this respect, they influence the final outcomes through their professional judgement rather than any hierarchal power.

Respondent R24 argues that shared leadership relies heavily on trust. This was further acknowledged by other respondents who added the importance of professional credibility and long-term collaboration (respondents R1, R5, R7). When these elements from the leadership perspective are present, external partners could expect to have a significant role in the decision-making process even without having a formal authority or a power-based hierarchal position. These findings support the idea that leadership can be understood as a relational and a distributive process that develops through interaction, mutual influence and collaboration between different actors (Uhl-Bien, 2006). Research on shared leadership also shows that influence can be shared (Carso, Tesluk, & Marrone, 2007) going beyond the formal boundaries of legitimate power, relying mostly on expert, referent and information power that are highly associated with the contemporary understanding of leadership.

Creative and Production Roles as a Leadership Process (CPL)

Many of the respondents from analytical cluster three argue that leadership in sustainability communication is closely connected to the specific tasks and situations. This was supported by respondents R6, R11, R13, R22, R24.

Respondents R11 and R13 elaborated that campaign development happens in different phase and different types of expert types become important in the different phases. For example, sometimes creative ideas are central, while in other moments technical execution, ethical consideration or story telling are more essential. In this line, according to respondents R4 and R11 leadership does not stay only with one person, but it shifts between different organisational roles, such as directors, producers, editors, or copywriters. "The person who leads at the given moment is usually the one with the most relevant knowledge for the specific problem" (respondent R4).

Decision-making also follows this logic (respondent R4). Authority is not fixed and it strongly tight with the specific situation or circumstances. For example, when there are ethical concerns or production challenges leadership shifts to those who can best address these problems. In this sense, leadership is based more on expertise and problem solving rather than on formal position or hierarchy. This is supporting previous findings that shared leadership is an emergent

process, where influence is distributed between actors depending on their knowledge and requirements of the situation (Gichuhi, 2021).

Respondent R24 shared that frequently their work is shaped by uncertainty, limited resources, public sensitivity, and new technologies. Because of this, the decisions are rarely made alone, rather discussed and taken through continuous interaction with internal specialists, external experts and media representatives. We could argue that leadership in creative and production roles is dynamic and constantly changing. It emerges through everyday interaction and negotiation rather than through fixed structures or formal authority positions.

Media Actors in Leadership in Public Communication Process (CPL)

Respondents from the media professionals analytical cluster argue that media organisations are not only channels for communication, but they also play an active role in shaping sustainability messages (respondents R14, R15, R16). Respondents R15 and R16 explained that media work includes activities such as setting agendas, creating content, and raising awareness about sustainability topics. In many cases, many organizations are directly involved in developing campaigns, especially when these are connected to social causes or public interest (respondents R14, R15). These collaborations are often informal and not based on strict hierarchy. Instead they are guided by shared goals, values and social responsibility. Respondents R14 and R16 elaborate that this common leadership is more horizontal and based on cooperation rather than control.

All the participants within the media analytical cluster share the opinion that media actors have an important advisory role. They help organizations to decide how to present messages, what tone of voice to use, and how to avoid ethical problems, especially in sensitive situations. Their influence comes from their expertise, understanding of audiences, and professional judgement. We could conclude that leadership is not framed only inside organizations, but it also exists in the broader communication environment. Media actors contribute by connecting organisational intentions with the public expectations. These findings support the conclusions of Christensen, Morsing, & Thyssen (2013) that communication is a key process in shaping meaning and translating sustainability to practice. In this line the representatives of the third cluster state that leadership could be defined as based on shared responsibility, collaboration, and expertise, where media actors help guiding communication in a way that is credible, relevant, and socially responsible.

Socially Oriented Expertise and Mediation in Sustainability Communication (SOE)

This analytical cluster includes professionals who work closely with social groups, such as children, NGOs, or vulnerable communities and their main role is to connect organizations with these groups ensuring that sustainable communication is appropriate and meaningful. Respondents R12, R17 and R19 explain that their work focuses on social sensitivity and relevance. They often act as mediators between organizational goals and the needs of specific communities. The representatives of the cluster argue that leadership in this context is not based only on formal authority but on dialogue and transparent, authentic cooperation. These experts are involved in continuous discussions with other actors such as companies, agencies and media professionals. They help to adjust communication ideas so that they are socially acceptable and ethically appropriate. According to respondent R15 in many cases, they challenge initial concepts or decisions when they see potential risks or misunderstanding. The respondents defend the idea that this process should not be considered as a conflict. Instead, it is part of developing better and more responsible communication (R12, R17, R19). Participants described this as a process of joint learning and mutual adjustment. Their role becomes especially important because sustainability

projects often do not have clear models or standard solutions. This supports previous findings that organisations need to adapt constantly and consider different perspectives which creates a need for ongoing negotiation and coordination (Hahn et al., 2015). The respondents generalise that leadership is based on mediation, trust, and understanding of specific social context (respondents R12, R17, R19). The experts help ensuring that communication is relevant and credible for the different audiences. The answers provide arguments that shared leadership can take the form of social mediation. It supports better alignment between organizational goals and social expectations.

Cross – cluster synthesis

Analysing the answers from the respondents we could define several common patterns related to shared leadership within the sustainability communication framework that are relevant for the five analytical clusters

Table 2. Cross-Cluster Synthesis				
Analytical Cluster	Type of Challenge	Trigger for Leadership Reconfiguration	Leadership Practice	Research Questions
IOL	Regulatory volatility; tension between short-term performance and long-term sustainability; reputational risk	Need to translate strategic sustainability commitments into operational communication practices	Coordination, interpretation, and redistribution of leadership influence within hierarchical structures	RQ1, RQ2, RQ3
ECP	Reputational risk; heightened public sensitivity; uncertainty;	Lack of internal expertise and need for external professional judgment; Persuasive communication to decision makers	Informal, expertise-based influence and consultative leadership beyond formal authority	RQ1, RQ2
CPL	Uncertainty; resource constraints; ethical and production dilemmas; Communication requirements (brand and public acceptability)	Task and phase-specific challenges in campaign development	Temporary, expertise-based leadership enacted through horizontal coordination	RQ1, RQ2
MA	Public pressure and ethical accountability; expansion beyond traditional media roles; greenwashing risks; and tensions between pro bono expectations and corporate pressure to legitimize branded initiatives through unpaid media exposure	Cause-driven engagement and social mission	Horizontal coordination, partnership-based leadership, and shared responsibility	RQ1, RQ3
SOE	Social sensitivity; lack of standardized models for sustainability; limitation and specific needs of the social groups they work with	Need for social legitimacy and contextual relevance; media fatigue and neglect	Mediation, co-framing and corrective influence through dialogue and mutual accommodation	RQ1, RQ2, RQ3

Source: Authors 'contribution.

Leadership is considered as a natural response to complexity and uncertainty of the organisational environment. Shared leadership is not initially planned as a fixed model, but it develops naturally when different actors need to work together and respond to changing environment. This supports previous research that shared leadership is a dynamic and emergent process shaped by interaction, uncertainty, and context (Gichuhi, 2021; Muller, Bodea, & Radujkovic, 2023). Across all clusters leadership is practised through communication, coordination and negotiation. People work together to make sense of situations, solve problems, and make decisions. In this respect shared leadership is not based only on formal authority, but rather on transparent collaboration and interaction.

Another important pattern is the way leadership moves across boundaries. It is not limited to hierarchy or specific roles. Shared leadership relies on expert, referent and information power. Even though formal structures still exist, the leadership initiative shifts depending on the situation or the specific need. For example, different actors take the lead when there are regulatory challenges, ethical concerns, or creative problems. In this way leadership becomes a shared process of interpersonal communication, expert input, and fluent coordination. These findings support previous research that leadership is a relational and socially dependent process (Uhl-Bien, 2006; Gichuhi, 2021).

Other important finding is that tension plays a positive role with regards to shared leadership. Respondents describe different types of tension such as conflicts between business goals and public expectations for sustainability, or even creative limitations. Instead of stopping the process, these tensions and stress factors often lead to positive discussions and projects adjustments. They help different actors to reflect, discuss, and find better solutions. These conclusions are in line with other scholars showing that sustainability work often involves competing demands that need continuous balancing (Hahn et al., 2015; Cho et al., 2012).

Another common pattern among the five clusters is the importance of mediation and translation. The respondents justify the need of different actors who help translate ideas into practice. For example, they turn strategic goals into concrete actions, adapting messages to different audiences, and connecting organizational priorities with social expectations. This process supports trust and credibility, that are especially required in uncertain situations. This is in line with previous research that explains that communication is considered central for making sustainability meaningful and understandable (Christensen, Morsing, & Thyssen, 2013). The analysis shows that shared leadership is not utilizing a fixed structure. It is a flexible and evolving process that develops through interaction between different actors who bring their expertise and work together to deal with complex challenges.

Conclusion

This study explores how leadership works in sustainability oriented corporate communication, especially in situations that are characterised with high uncertainty and complexity. The findings show that shared leadership is not only based on formal rules or hierarchy. It appears as a shared process between different actors that are not limited within the organizational framework. Shared leadership develops through coordination, collaboration, discussion, negotiation and mutual understanding. It is shaped by challenges such as changing regulations, ethical concerns, limited resources, and strong public expectations. This study contributes to leadership research by showing that shared leadership is not limited to teams or formal structures. It can also be seen in broader networks that include organisations, external partners, media actors, and social experts. In this

context, communication is not only an outcome of leadership but also a key mechanism through which leadership is created and practised. From a practical point of view the findings suggest that organisation should not rely only on formal authority. They should support collaboration, trust, and acknowledge sharing between different doctors, relying not only on legitimate power, but also utilizing expert, referent and information powers. The findings suggest that flexible leadership and openness to different perspectives can help organisations manage complexity and avoid risks such as “superficial sustainability communication” or “greenwashing”.

The study has certain limitations. The sample is relatively small and focuses on a specific context. In this respect, the results cannot be generalised to all situations or organisational settings. Further research can expand this work by studying different countries, industries or using other research methods. It would be of highest interest to analyse the correlation of shared leadership practices and different organisational cultures. It would also be useful to explore how shared leadership develops over time. The study shows that leadership in sustainability communications setting should be understood as a dynamic and shared process. It highly depends on interaction between people and their ability to work together in complex and changing organisational environments.

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