

Kerangka Strategis untuk Komunikasi Keberlanjutan Yang Autentik Guna Mengurangi Risiko Greenwashing di Resor Mewah

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Abstrak

Sektor perhotelan mewah menghadapi tantangan besar. Mereka harus menyampaikan pesan keberlanjutan kepada audiens yang masih ragu-ragu, tapi tanptta terkena tuduhan greenwashing. Risiko ini bisa sangat merugikan merek mewah, karena nilai inti mereka justru bergantung pada kepercayaan dan keaslian dari para konsumen. Penelitian ini mencoba mengatasi masalah itu dengan mengkaji strategi komunikasi pemasaran di Capella Ubud, Bali. Resor ini sudah dikenal luas berkat komitmennya pada keberlanjutan. Dengan mendekonstruksi struktur komunikasi proaktif resor tersebut, penelitian ini menghasilkan kerangka strategis yang bisa diterapkan lebih luas di industry ini. Metode penelitiannya adalah studi kasus tunggal secara kualitatif. Data dikumpulkan melalui triangulasi, termasuk wawancara tertulis dengan staf inti dari tim marketing, pengamatan digital di berbagai saluran online, dan analisis dokumen public. Data itu kemudian diinterpretasikan lewat analisis tematik, dengan lensa teori Komunikasi Pemasaran Terintegrasi (IMC) dan Teori Sinyal. Analisis menemukan strategi proaktif yang kuat, didukung empat tema yang saling terkait: (1) membangun fondasi kredibilitas lewat sinyal yang bisa diverifikasi; (2) menciptakan narasi autentik melalui keterlibatan mendalam dengan budaya lokal dan komunitas sekitar; (3) menjaga konsistensi pesan melalui proses komunikasi yang terpadu; dan (4) menjadikan keberlanjutan sebagai bagian nyata dari pengalaman tamu, dengan menyelamatkan ke inti layanan. Penelitian menyimpulkan bahwa kemampuan Capella Ubud, Bali dalam memitigasi risiko greenwashing berasal dari strategi yang utuh dan fleksibel. Keempat tema ini saling mendukung dalam siklus penguatan timbal balik. Kerangka yang diusulkan ini diharapkan bisa membantu merek mewah lain memperkuat integritas merek mereka. Dengan begitu, keberlanjutan bisa berubah dari potensi beban menjadi aset utama yang memperkaya identitas merek.

Kata Kunci – Greenwashing, Kerangka Strategis, Komunikasi Keberlanjutan Autentik, Perhotelan Mewah

A Strategic Framework for Authentic Sustainability Communication to Mitigate Greenwashing in Luxury Resort

Abstract

The luxury hospitality sector faces the critical challenge of communicating sustainability to a sceptical audience without being accused of greenwashing, a risk that is particularly damaging to luxury brands whose value depends on consumer trust and authenticity. This

study addresses this problem by analysing the marketing communication strategy of Capella Ubud, Bali, a resort recognised for its sustainability. The research deconstructs the resort's proactive communication architecture to produce a transferable strategic framework for the wider industry. A qualitative single case study methodology was used, triangulating data from written interviews with key marketing staff, digital observation of online channels, and an analysis of public documents. This data was then interpreted using thematic analysis through the theoretical lenses of Integrated Marketing Communication (IMC) and Signalling Theory. The analysis reveals a proactive strategy built on four interconnected pillars: (1) establishing foundational credibility with verifiable signals like third-party certifications; (2) creating authentic narratives through deep cultural and community immersion; (3) ensuring message consistency with an integrated communication process; and (4) making sustainability a lived reality by weaving it into the core guest experience. The study concludes that the resort's ability to mitigate greenwashing risk comes from a cohesive and dynamic strategy where all four pillars work in a mutually reinforcing cycle. It proposes a framework to help other luxury brands enhance their brand integrity and transform sustainability from a potential liability into a core brand asset.

Keywords – Greenwashing, Strategic Framework, Authentic Sustainability Communication, Luxury Hospitality

INTRODUCTION

In the luxury hospitality industry, a new conflict has appeared where the worlds of luxury and sustainability meet. As travellers around the world become more aware of environmental issues, they expect luxury brands to be responsible. Data shows that a majority of international travellers (76%) now want to make more sustainable choices when they travel (Booking.com, 2023; PoB Hotels, 2024; WTTC, 2024). This change in customer expectation has created a serious risk for hotels, greenwashing. Greenwashing is the practice of making false or unproven claims about being environmentally friendly to create a misleadingly positive public image (de Freitas Netto et al., 2020; Delmas & Burbano, 2011; Yang et al., 2020). This practice can damage the trust of consumers, which is very important asset for luxury brands that depend on their reputation for being authentic (Walker & Wan, 2012). Customer scepticism is already high; one report showed that 78% of travellers question the truth of sustainability claims and want companies to be more transparent (Chen et al., 2019; Parguel et al., 2015). The main problem for a luxury hotel is not just being sustainable, but also communicating its sustainability efforts in a way that is believable and honest. This leads to the central questions of this research: How does a luxury hospitality brand design its communication to mitigate greenwashing, and what elements of that strategy can form a transferable framework for the wider industry? Academic literature provides a strong foundation for this topic. Previous studies have clearly established the negative relationship between greenwashing and consumer trust (Aji & Sutikno, 2015; Alyahia et al., 2024). Scholars agree that being transparent and authentic is crucial for fighting these negative effects. The strategic importance of using Integrated Marketing Communication (IMC) to deliver a clear sustainability message has also been well-argued (Kitchen & Tourky, 2022; Sebastian & Kunjuman, 2023). Similarly, some

specific studies have started to explore the challenges of using Signalling Theory to communicate sustainability within the luxury market (Connelly et al., 2024; Torelli et al., 2020). However, a deeper review of these literature shows that it is mostly diagnostic. Much of the existing academic research has already identified the problem of greenwashing and its negative consequences. These studies are helpful, but they often look at the problem from a reactive point of view, focusing on the results of greenwashing after it has already happened. A review of a literature shows there is a gap in study that focuses on proactive planning. Therefore, it is needed to conduct a study that explain how a luxury brand can build its communication strategy from the very beginning to be strong enough to resist accusations of dishonesty. This study provides a deep analysis of this problem by focusing on a specific case. The study investigates how Capella Ubud, Bali as a luxury brand, designs its marketing communication strategy to mitigate the risk of greenwashing. This study aims to fill that gap by shifting the focus from a reactive to a proactive perspective. The novelty of this research is that it does not just recommend transparency as a solution, instead it deconstructs the entire communication architecture of a specific luxury resort to understand how an authentic narrative is built from the ground up. By applying the combined theoretical frameworks of Integrated Marketing Communication (IMC) and Signalling Theory, this study provides a detailed analysis of how verifiable actions are strategically woven into a cohesive and credible story. The goal is to produce a strategic framework with practical insights that may be transferable to the wider luxury hospitality industry as it faces the growing need for genuine sustainability.

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

This study uses a qualitative approach to get a deep and rich understanding of the topic. It is designed as an instrumental single case study, which is an effective method for answering ‘how’ and ‘why’ questions about a complex, real-world situation. This design allowed for a detailed investigation of the communication practices at a specific luxury resort in its natural context. The study focused on one specific case: Capella Ubud, Bali. This resort was chosen because it was very suitable example for this research topic. There were three main reasons for this choice, such as, it has a formal, public policy on sustainability, it communicates many real and tangible sustainability actions, providing a rich source of data for analysis, and most importantly its sustainability claims are verified by independent bodies, as the resort received the EarthCheck Gold Certification and LHW Sustainability Leader Awards. To get a complete and detailed picture, this study employs data triangulation technique to collect data from multiple sources and to make the study findings more credible and trustworthy. Written interviews were conducted with key persons in the marketing communication department of Capella Ubud, Bali. This asynchronous method was chosen to respect the demanding schedules of these industry professionals. The researcher systematically observed the resort’s main online platforms, including its official website and Instagram account. This observation focused on all sustainability-related communications published between January 2024 and April 2025. A range of publicly available

documents were analysed, including, the official press releases, marketing materials, and the resort's published sustainability policies from 2024 to 2025. All the data collected from the three methods was analysed using thematic analysis. This is a qualitative method used to identify, examine, and report patterns, or 'themes', within a set of information (Clarke & Braun, 2014; Terry et al., 2017). The analysis process was done in two main stages. First, initial codes and themes were developed directly from the data itself in a bottom-up process. After these themes were established, they were then interpreted through the theoretical lenses of IMC and Signalling Theory. To ensure the research was high quality, several strategies were used to support the trustworthiness of the findings, the main strategy was data triangulation to make the findings more credible by allowing for the cross-verification of information from different sources. In addition, a clear and detailed record of every step of the research process was kept. This creates a transparent audit trail that supports the dependability of the study.

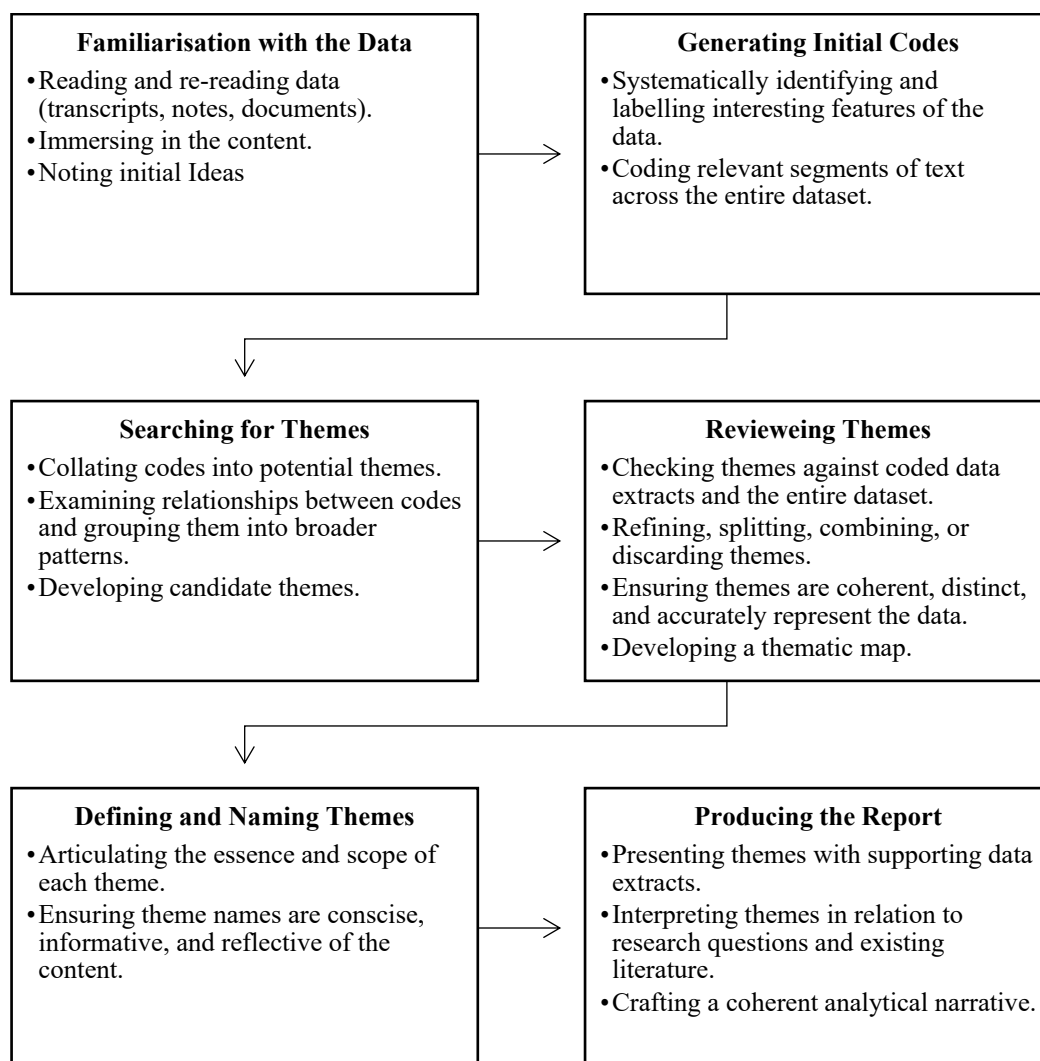


Figure 1. Thematic Analysis Workflow
Source: Clarke and Braun (2014)

RESULT AND DISCUSSION

Result

The findings reveal that Capella Ubud, Bali's strategy effectively mitigates greenwashing risks by using a sophisticated system that proactively builds credibility, build upon four interconnected themes: establishing foundational credibility, fostering deep cultural and community immersion, executing a strategically integrated communication process, and integrating sustainability into the core guest experience. Each of these themes contributes a unique dimension to the resort's communication blueprint.

Theme 1: Foundational Credibility through Verifiable Signals

The first and most important theme found in Capella Ubud, Bali's strategy is its focus on building foundational credibility. The data showed that the entire communication approach is built on a base of tangible, specific, and verifiable proof. This theme is about showing, not just telling, and it directly addresses the problem of customer scepticism by providing concrete evidence from the very beginning. A primary way the resort builds this credibility is through third-party certifications. The findings showed that the resort consistently and publicly highlights its EarthCheck Gold certification and its recognition as a Leading Hotels of the World (LHW) Sustainability Leader. These are not just logos; the communication presents them as the result of a long-term commitment that has been measured and verified by respected, independent experts. This is a powerful tactic because it shifts the burden of trust from the resort to these external organisations, which makes the sustainability claims much more believable for a sceptical audience. In addition to third-party validation, the resort uses high-risk, specific claims. The most powerful example found in the resort's narrative is the claim, attributed to its architect, that 'no single tree was felled' during construction. The power of this claim, as shown in the data, comes from its precision. Unlike vague statements like "we respect nature," this is an absolute and verifiable claim. This makes it a high-risk statement for the brand's reputation, because if it were false, it would be easy to disprove. The fact that the resort is willing to make such a specific claim gives it significant credibility. Finally, these main signals are supported by a portfolio of detailed operational evidence. The resort's communications provide further specific details that show its commitment is real and integrated into its daily operations. Examples found in the documents and informant responses include the on-site water bottling plant that helps eliminate single-use plastics and a comprehensive composting program for managing organic waste. By providing these concrete examples, the resort demonstrates that its sustainability commitment is not just a marketing concept, but a tangible part of its operational reality. Together, these different types of proof create a strong foundation of trust that supports all other communication efforts.

Theme 2: Deep Cultural and Community Immersion

The second theme of the resort's strategy is its focus on building deep cultural and community immersion. The findings showed that this approach moves beyond just environmental metrics to create an authentic narrative that gives the communication its 'soul'. It aims to position the brand not as an outsider, but as an active and respectful participant in the local Balinese heritage. A key part of this theme involves creating immersive guest experiences that are framed as genuine cultural exchanges. The data revealed that instead of offering generic tourist activities, the resort provides opportunities for guests to engage with local traditions. Examples include workshops where guests can learn to make 'Canang Sari' (traditional Balinese offerings) or learn the unique and traditional 'Keliki' style of painting directly from local artists. These experiences are significant because they connect guests with authentic aspects of Balinese life and culture, moving beyond a superficial interaction. This is supported by strategic community partnerships that are communicated in public documents and were detailed by informants. The findings showed these are not just one-time donations but long-term collaborations. Examples include the resort's support for the local Wayan Gama Art School to help preserve a unique art form, and its collaboration with the R.O.L.E. Foundation on a 'Zero Waste Soap programme'. These actions are presented as genuine engagements that demonstrate a long-term investment in the well-being of the local community. According to marketing team informants, these initiatives are the foundation of their "Authentic Storytelling" strategy. This is a conscious approach designed to forge a real emotional connection with the audience by sharing genuine stories of community support and cultural preservation. By actively participating in and supporting local culture, the resort's commitment appears to be deeply embedded in its identity, rather than a shallow marketing strategy. This theme builds a narrative that is perceived as authentic and is difficult for competitors to fake, which helps protect the brand from accusations that its sustainability efforts are shallow or just for show.

"Dive into the rich intricacies of the Keliki painting tradition, which depict a plethora of Balinese imagery in the tiniest of frameworks.

Explore your artistic talent at Wayan Gama Art School, which is unique to the village of Keliki and is one of the 5 recognized art forms in Bali...."

Figure 2. Narrative Used by Capella Ubud, Bali to Build A Deep Cultural and Community Immersion

Source: Official Instagram account of Capella Ubud, Bali on 18 February 2024

Theme 3: Strategically Integrated and Tailored Communication

The third theme of the resort's strategy is its focus on strategically integrated and tailored communication. The findings showed that this theme provides the architectural blueprint for all of the resort's messaging. It is a professional and coordinated process that ensures the sustainability narrative is delivered with

coherence and consistency across all channels, both inside the organisation and to the public. A key part of this theme, as revealed by the data, is the internal communication structure. Informants described a dedicated, cross-departmental “Green Team” that is responsible for communicating all sustainability initiatives and guidelines to every department in the resort. This internal structure is crucial because it helps the organisation “walk the talk.” It ensures that sustainability is a shared operational reality for all staff – from housekeeping to the culinary team – rather than just a marketing function. This internal alignment is a direct countermeasure to the form of greenwashing known as decoupling, where a company’s public claims do not match its internal actions. This internal consistency is then matched by a tailored external strategy. The findings showed that the resort adapts its core sustainability message for different channels to maximise its impact. For example, visually-driven platforms like Instagram are used for beautiful photos and emotional storytelling that show sustainability in action. In contrast, the official website is used to present more formal and detailed information, such as specific data and official policies, for stakeholders who want to see the hard evidence. The Director of Marketing and Communications called this consistency a cornerstone of the strategy. This entire process is managed through a monthly social media content calendar, which shows that the communication is deliberate and planned, not random. This highly organised approach, which combines internal alignment with a tailored external strategy, ensures that the resort’s authentic sustainability practices are translated into a trustworthy and unified brand story. By being so disciplined with its messaging, the resort prevents sending mixed signals or contradictory information, which directly lowers the risk of making disjointed or misleading claims that could be seen as greenwashing.

Theme 4: Weaving Sustainability into the Core Guest Experience

The fourth and final theme of the strategy is about weaving sustainability into the core guest experience. The findings showed that this approach aims to transform sustainability from an abstract policy into a tangible and valuable part of the luxury experience for guests. This theme is arguably the most critical, as it is where the resort’s claims are ultimately proven or disproven in the eyes of the customer. It completes the communication circle by making the sustainability ethos interactive and verifiable. A key part of this theme is creating participatory experiences that allow guests to engage directly with the resort’s commitment. For instance, the resort’s restaurants are marketed with a “farm-to-table” narrative, which highlights the use of fresh ingredients from the on-site organic gardens and local farms. This is more than just a menu description; it is a story that connects the luxury dining experience directly to the health of the local ecosystem, allowing guests to see and taste the commitment for themselves. The findings also showed that the resort uses the physical hotel environment as a communication channel. A primary example of this is the use of in-room QR codes that link guests directly to detailed sustainability information. This is a subtle but powerful tactic, as it integrates the message seamlessly into the guest’s private space and allows them to explore the information at their own pace. By doing this, the resort demonstrates that its sustainability commitment is not just a public-facing message but an integrated part of the entire

property. Finally, this theme is supported by a feedback loop for continuous improvement. The marketing team confirmed that it actively monitors the success of its efforts by tracking social media engagement and, more formally, by using post-stay surveys that ask specific questions about sustainability. This shows that the resort is not just broadcasting messages but is also actively listening to guest perceptions. By turning communication into a two-way dialogue, the resort reinforces its authenticity and turns guests into witnesses who can confirm that the brand's promises are true, making it very difficult for anyone to dismiss its commitment as just greenwashing.

Discussion

The findings of this study show a carefully built communication strategy. To understand *why* this strategy is effective, the analysis went through the theoretical frameworks of Integrated Marketing Communication (IMC) and Signalling Theory. The findings can be interpreted as a sophisticated application of IMC theory. A clear and consistent message of responsible luxury that values both nature and culture is communicated uniformly across the resort's website, social media, and even its physical design (Kitchen & Tourky, 2022). More than just repeating the message, the different channels work together. For example, an Instagram post might show an attractive dish, which leads an interested customer to the resort's website for more detail on its "farm-to-table" philosophy. This journey creates a seamless experience for the stakeholder. At the same time, Signalling Theory helps to explain how this communication builds trust (Connelly et al., 2024). The resort's strategy can be seen as a way of sending credible signals to reduce customer uncertainty. The EarthCheck Gold certification and LHW Sustainability Leader award are classic "costly signals". They require significant financial and operational commitment, which makes them a believable indicator of genuine commitment that is hard for competitors to copy. The claim that "no single tree was felled" is a "high-reputational risk" signal. Its specific nature makes it easy to check and costly to falsify, which gives it credibility. Together, this portfolio of signals creates a strong "meta-signal" of authenticity. These findings provide practical support for several key ideas in academic literature. The strategic use of third-party certifications like EarthCheck supports the arguments of researchers who identified "green transparency and authenticity" as critical for fighting the negative impacts of greenwashing (Alyahia et al., 2024). The findings also confirm other research which argued that independent certifications are highly effective for combining the sometimes-conflicting signals of luxury and sustainability (Osburg et al., 2022). While a previous study on Capella Ubud, Bali established a positive link between its green practices and its brand image (Ening, 2024), this study builds on that work by deconstructing the underlying communication structure that makes those practice into a trustworthy brand story.

Based on this analysis, this study proposes a strategic framework to help luxury hospitality brands build authentic sustainability communication. This framework is not a linear process but a dynamic cycle made of four interconnected and mutually reinforcing themes. Foundational credibility requires brands to root

their story in proof, not just promises. This means using costly, internationally recognised third-party certifications and specific, verifiable claims about their operations. Deep cultural and community immersion gives the narrative its soul. It requires brands to build genuine, long-term partnerships with local communities and artisans, and to tell human-focused stories about this engagement. Strategic integrated communication serves as the architectural blueprint. It requires a centralised, evidence-based communication plan that is consistent across all channels, from social media to internal staff training. And lastly, to weave sustainability into the core guest experience. This theme makes the strategy a lived reality. It requires brands to design guest experiences that allow them to participate in and witness the sustainability commitment firsthand. By adopting this four-theme framework, luxury hospitality brands can build a strong communication strategy that not only reduces the risk of greenwashing but also turns sustainability into a genuine and valuable brand asset.

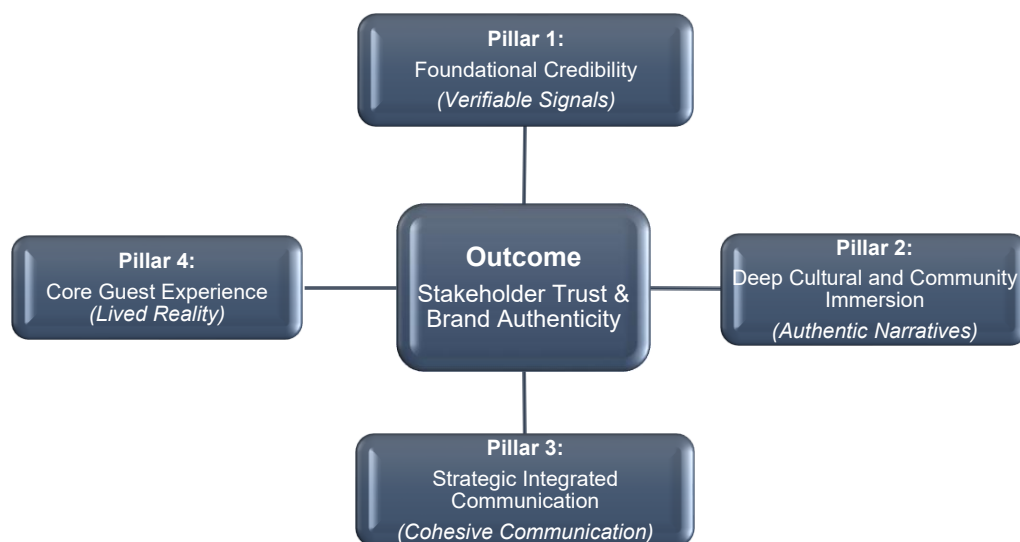


Figure 3. The Strategic Framework for Authentic Sustainability Communication

To demonstrate how this proposed framework can be applied in practice, Table 1. Provides a clear summary. It maps the specific initiatives and communication tactics that were identified at Capella Ubud, Bali, directly onto the four themes of the strategic framework. This table serves to connect the theoretical model back to the concrete findings of the case study, showing how each theme is supported by real-world actions.

Table 1. Mapping of Capella Ubud, Bali’s Initiative to The Strategic Framework

No	Framework Theme	Initiative Example	Signal/Channel
1	Foundational Credibility	EarthCheck Gold Certification	Press release, website footer
		No trees felled during construction	Bill Bensley’s design narrative

2	Deep Cultural and Community Immersion	Support for Wayan Gama Art School	Instagram posts featuring local artists
		“Keliki style” painting workshops	“Capella Curates” guest program
3	Strategic Integrated Communication	Centralised messaging from EarthCheck	Internal communication frameworks
		In-room QR code for sustainability information	Guest-facing technology
4	Core Guest Experience	Farm-to-table dining	Menu descriptions, Instagram posts
		Post-stay sustainability survey	Post-stay survey mechanism

CONCLUSION

This study investigated how a luxury hospitality brand can design and implement its marketing communication to transparently share its sustainability initiatives and reduce the risk of greenwashing. The main conclusion from the analysis of Capella Ubud, Bali, is that its effective approach is not based on isolated strategy but on a dynamic, multi-layered strategy. The resort’s ability to build a credible sustainability narrative comes from the synergistic application of Integrated Marketing Communication (IMC) and Signalling Theory. These strategies work in a mutually reinforcing framework: foundational credibility allows for authentic storytelling, which is then validated by the guest experience. This, in turn, generates new credible signals that strengthen the foundation of trust. The findings of this study have several important implications. For theory, this research contributes to the academic discussion on greenwashing by shifting the focus from a reactive, problem-oriented perspective to one of proactive, strategic design. It offers a framework that shows the dynamic relationship between verifiable signals, authentic narratives, and stakeholder experience. For hospitality managers and marketing professionals, the main practical implication is the need to see sustainability communication as a continuous process, not a one-time campaign. The study shows that all four themes must work together. When communicated through this authentic framework, sustainability can be changed from a business cost into a powerful driver of brand value and differentiation.

SUGGESTION

While this study offers an in-depth analysis, its limitations point to clear opportunities for future research. As this was a qualitative study focused on a single case study, the findings have limited generalisability. Future research should therefore conduct comparative case studies of other luxury resorts in different geographical and cultural context to test the adaptability of the proposed framework. Furthermore, this study focused on the design on the communication strategy, not on how it was received by customers. A valuable next step would be to conduct quantitative or mixed-methods research to measure guest perceptions

and behavioural responses to these strategies. Finally, this study was limited by its reliance on written interviews. Future research should aim to use live interviews to allow for more spontaneous and detailed narrative data.

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