



The pertinence of a communication for sustainable development course in university: A case of Universiti Sains Malaysia

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ABSTRACT

In line with Universiti Sains Malaysia (USM)'s designation as Malaysia's "university in a garden", the Communication for Sustainable Development course is offered by the School of Communication on a compulsory basis for all undergraduate communication students, and on an optional basis for other students. This study aims to examine students' perception on the relevance of the Communication for Sustainable Development course at USM. Sixteen undergraduate students from three different batches – who had completed the course in 2019, 2020, and 2021 – were interviewed online. The analysis highlights the uniqueness of the course and reveals that all students perceived this course as highly relevant to them, for exposing them to the concept of sustainable development and teaching them ways to effectively communicate sustainability messages. The students also described the uniqueness of the course, highlighted by its focus on sustainable development, in addition to its issue-based approach. Moreover, the students also described the crucial role of social media as an effective tool for communicating about sustainability. Overall, the students opined that this course is highly pertinent to USM and the university's prized reputation and branding of sustainability. The insightful findings offer a valuable guideline for universities and course coordinators in designing and developing sustainable communication courses.

Keywords: **Communication, sustainable development, sustainability education, university, interview**

INTRODUCTION

The role of education and higher education institutions in sustainability through sustainable universities has been long emphasised by established national and international organisations such as the United Nations (UN) (2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development) and the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) “Education for Sustainable Development” (Fissi et al., 2021; Salas-Zapata & Cardona-Arias, 2021; Shulla et al., 2020). As an effective communication channel for sustainability issues (Lertpratchya et al., 2017), universities are expected to play a pivotal role in establishing awareness among societies on sustainable development, primarily through their students (Kopnina, 2020). For instance, the latter are expected to contribute to sustainable development by conveying the right sustainable message to their communities (Fissi et al., 2021). These messages might be verbal (e.g., interpersonal communication) or non-verbal, such as through sustainable practices. Therefore, to effectively communicate sustainability, it is necessary for future leaders, decision-makers, planners, producers, or performers to possess effective communication skills to ensure the delivery of the right messages to receivers (individuals in a community), who can make meaningful change in their society (Lynn-Sze, 2021).

Recently, many universities worldwide have started implementing and fostering sustainable practices in their respective curricula and research programs, in addition to creating various communication channels and strategies for sustainability to address the current interconnected social, environmental, and economic challenges (Anastasiadis et al., 2021; Fissi et al., 2021; Holdsworth & Sandri, 2021; Vermeulen et al., 2014). For instance, in the USA, Utah State University, has incorporated a Communicating Sustainability course for its upper-level undergraduate students (Brain & Thomas, 2013). In the same way, Michigan State University, provides various programs, courses, and seminars for its students (Lertpratchya et al., 2017). In Germany, Freie Universität Berlin is also known for its sustainability management with a specific focus on climate change, which includes initiatives such as energy efficiency programs in the campus (Wanke, 2017).

Similarly, universities in Malaysia have realised the importance of such courses and programs at different levels. For instance, Universiti Teknologi Petronas has incorporated a sustainability focus within its Professional Communication Skills module that is offered to engineering students (Sivapalan, 2017). Likewise, Universiti Sains Malaysia (USM) as one of the leading universities in the country that recognises the importance of communication and communication programs (Yusof et al., 2018), offers a Communication for Sustainable Development course for undergraduate communication students, which aims to educate students about communication processes in the context of sustainable development, and to arm them with various methods to effectively convey sustainability messages to the public.

Indeed, it seems impossible to achieve a sustainable society without social communication about sustainability (Adom̃bent, 2013; Genç, 2017). In this context, effective communication can significantly influence individuals’ behaviour, initiate discussion, foster understanding, and open up dialogue between groups. In addition, it plays a crucial role in clarifying uncertainty and complex issues related to sustainability and sustainable development, as well as essential for stakeholders’ collaboration and co-creation, engaging universities, colleges, and the society as a whole with the sustainable development agenda (Fischer et al., 2016; Franz-Balsen & Heinrichs, 2007; Kim et al., 2018; Newig et al., 2013; Scandeliu & Cohen, 2016). On the other hand, poor communication is a possible explanation for the struggle some universities face in transforming sustainability awareness and environmental concerns into tangible results, either towards their immediate

community (i.e., staff, faculty members, and students) or the extended one (e.g., stakeholders, society) (Kim et al., 2018). Therefore, there is a demanding need for strategies to communicate sustainability at various levels and contexts, such as business and academics (Kim et al., 2018).

Recently, due to the limited research on learning and teaching sustainability education (Holdsworth & Sandri, 2021) and sustainability communication, there is a great need to understand more about the role of communication in sustainability or how to communicate sustainability (Fischer et al., 2016; Kwok & Hallstedt, 2018; Scandellius & Cohen, 2016; Tölkes, 2018). In addition, there is a limited body of work on understanding students' perception of sustainability communication courses offered by universities in Asia. Therefore, in order to contribute to the emerging body of work and growing interest on the application of education to promote sustainability, and how it can be integrated in education at universities (Ferrer-Estévez & Chalmeta, 2021; Zhou et al., 2022), this study attempts to explore the perception of undergraduate students towards the relevance of the Communication for Sustainable Development course provided by the School of Communication USM, which is nationally recognised as a sustainable university.

Understanding the concept of sustainability communication

In brief, sustainability communication is a relatively new interdisciplinary field of research and professional practice (Franz-Balsen & Heinrichs, 2007; Golob et al., 2023; Mohamad Saleh, 2022). It is concerned with communicating sustainability issues to others (sender to receiver) using different communication approaches to facilitate sustainable development (Fischer et al., 2016; Newig et al., 2013). Sustainability communication is believed to be an essential mechanism for effective collaboration among stakeholders to achieve sustainability goals and development (Fischer et al., 2016; Kwok & Hallstedt, 2018; Tölkes, 2018). Similarly, Kwok and Hallstedt (2018) defined it as sending or receiving information that aids decision-making regarding impacts on sustainable development. Mohamad Saleh (2017) argued that Sustainability Communication is an overlapping concept with Environmental Communication. In his recent work, Mohamad Saleh (2022) indicated that the concept of sustainability communication in Malaysia and Asia is similar to the West. Sustainability communication can be understood as a process of communicating sustainability, particularly in the context of social, economic and environmental issues, to the public.

In addition, scholars like Shahzalal and Hassan (2019) used the term Communication for Sustainable Development instead of Sustainability Communication, and defined it as communications that incorporate education, conversations, dialogues or active participation of both beneficiaries and benefactors to improve people's knowledge, level of self-confidence and sensitivity to others' choices of sustainable actions.

Furthermore, Newig et al. (2013), Fischer et al. (2016), and Genç (2017) offered more details regarding the term. Newig et al. (2013), for instance, developed a typology differentiating between the three perspectives related to the term, namely, communication of, about, and for sustainability. Firstly, they considered facilitating sustainable development through different communication approaches as communication for sustainability (CfS). It is more than just providing information related to sustainability and raising people's awareness about sustainability issues. Rather, it is a clear approach in advocating sustainability that aims to facilitate societal transformation towards the normative goals of sustainable development. Hence, CfS may include elements of communication of sustainability (CoS) and communication about sustainability (CaS), such as knowledge generation, social learning, developing solutions for sustainability problems and so forth.

Secondly, communication about sustainability (CaS) focuses on sharing concepts and frames in the context of sustainable development. In other words, it is the process in which information, interpretations, and opinions regarding sustainability issues are exchanged and debated. Under this horizontal type of communication, various sustainability issues could be discussed using multiple levels of communication such as interpersonal face-to-face interaction or using mass communication as a mediator. Thus, CaS could contribute to forming individuals' perceptions regarding sustainability issues.

Thirdly, the communication of sustainability (CoS) is about transforming information from a sender to a receiver(s) to convey a specific motivation. It is a sender-receiver-oriented or one-way communication mode. It is deliberate, instrumental, or managerial communication. Generally, CoS is to inform and educate people and accomplish some type and level of social engagement and action. Educators at a university seeking to grab students' attention to convey information about sustainability-related phenomena is an example of CoS.

Communication for Sustainable Development Course at Universiti Sains Malaysia

Established in 1969, USM is the second oldest leading research university in Malaysia. The core principle underlying USM's operations is sustainability, which led to its recognition as a green and garden university in the country. In line with this reputation as a sustainable university, USM has spearheaded efforts in the area of teaching, research policy, community engagement initiatives, and campus operations (Osman et al., 2017). As recognition of these pioneering efforts, USM was awarded the top ranking in the Impact Rankings of the Times Higher Education 2021 (39th in the world, 1st in Malaysia). Moreover, a recent study by Mohamad Saleh et al. (2021) discovered that USM's sustainable university branding has, to a certain extent, influenced the intention of international students' choice to study here.

In line with the sustainability agenda of USM, the School of Communication offers a Communication for Sustainability course (before 2023, it was called Communication for Sustainable Development) that is compulsory for undergraduate students majoring in communication. Around 120 to 160 students are enrolled in this course annually. The objective of the course is to highlight the importance of communication as a tool to effectively communicate about sustainability and sustainable development goals (SDGs). For two hours of lectures, students are taught the current issues of sustainability in Malaysia, Asia, Africa, and the West. Additionally, communication students at the School of Communication will be able to utilise the knowledge from the course to conduct related activities, such as running an environmental and sustainability campaign, in lieu of the final year research project that is required of other students.

Sustainability vision theory

Thus far, there is yet an ideal theoretical framework for Sustainability Communication due to the different scientific disciplines that might be involved in shaping its theoretical framework (Godemann & Michelsen, 2011). In the same context, there is limited evidence of using a theoretical perspective to collect data on sustainability-related courses, or to evaluate the practices, learning and teaching experiences, and course outcomes (Holdsworth & Sandri, 2021).

Nevertheless, a suitable theoretical framework is important to build a strong theoretical foundation for research, to better understand the relationships between different phenomena, and to guide research in achieving its objectives (Godemann & Michelsen, 2011; Holdsworth & Sandri, 2021; Wilkins et al., 2019).

This study is therefore built upon the Sustainability Vision Theory, which is concerned with the sustainability vision of an organisation. According to Kantabutra (2020), sustainability visions are characterised by several characteristics — brevity, clarity, future orientation, stability, challenge, abstractness, desirability, or ability in order to attract various stakeholders. The Sustainability Vision Theory suggests a process that consists of eight related phases to attain the sustainability vision of an organisation. These phases are sustainability vision, vision communication, shared vision, emotionally committed organisational members, congruous acts, corporate sustainability performance, satisfied stakeholders, and sustainable well-being (Kantabutra, 2020).

According to the Sustainability Vision Theory, communication is the first important mechanism after organisation sustainability vision, to communicate and share messages on sustainability, both internally among its members, and externally with stakeholders. In other words, it is the required tool that can enhance organisational members' commitment and turn a sustainability vision into reality (Kantabutra, 2020). For example, after USM formed its sustainability vision, the management of the university set out different steps and strategies to achieve this. For instance, taking cognisance of the importance of communication for sustainability, the university then established a communication vision, which included various strategies to communicate sustainability. One of the identified measures was the establishment of a course entitled Communication for Sustainable Development in the School of Communication. The course aims for the vision to be shared with students as members of the organisation, who would subsequently relay the message to their future career organisations. Based on the abovementioned framework, the current study investigates the students' perception (as members of the organisation system) on the relevance of the Communication for Sustainable Development course as a strategy to make changes related to sustainability and sustainable development (vision).

METHODOLOGY

This study aims to examine students' perception on the relevance of the Communication for Sustainable Development course offered as compulsory course for communication students and as an optional course for other students in USM. Sixteen undergraduate students from three different batches — who had completed the course in 2019, 2020, and 2021 — were interviewed online. The interview technique was chosen as it is a flexible method that allows researchers to explore the experiences, feeling and perceptions of interviewees on academic matters (Loyd & Murray, 2021). In addition, interview as a qualitative method also provides an opportunity for researchers to embrace subjective views during and after collecting data (Earl, 2021). Lastly, as the COVID-19 pandemic escalated in Malaysia, especially during the data collection of the study, the interviews were conducted online.

Purposive sampling was utilised to select interviewees who fulfil one inclusion criteria, that is, undergraduate students or alumni who have completed the course either in 2019, 2020, or 2021. Students who have not attended the course were not selected as they would not have been able to share their opinion about the course. The researchers decided to choose interviewees from three different batches, as the course undergoes continuous development and improvement, especially in line with contemporary sustainability issues. It is worth noting that the main author is the one who is familiar with the interviewees, interview questions and subject matter of the research (Toft et al., 2021), because he has been teaching the course for the past many years. This presented an advantage that led to a smooth and largely problem-free data collection process, as the main author had already established a good rapport with the interviewees and was therefore, able to easily communicate with the interviewees anytime during the research.

Interviewees were first invited to participate in the study via email and the WhatsApp application. The researchers provided the online interview questions to be answered by the interviewees. Before answering the interview questions, the interviewees were briefed about the purpose of the study, and their informed consent was also obtained. The interviewees were also informed about the confidentiality of their responses so that they could freely answer all the interview questions without any hesitation. The researchers developed bilingual interview questions (Malay and English) to allow the interviewees to answer the questions in either Malay or English depending on their comfortability.

As shown in Table 1, 16 interviewees from three different batches – 2019, 2020, and 2021 – participated. Specifically, five of them completed the course in 2019, and in 2020 respectively, while six of them recently completed the course in 2021. All interviewees were assigned with identification codes like IV1 to ensure their anonymity.

The majority of the interviewees (10 of them) answered the interview questions using Malay as it is the national language of Malaysia. In terms of gender, the interviewees were equally distributed, with eight males and eight females. Ethnically, Malay students made up the majority of the interviewees, as the Malays make up a significant portion of the cohorts in the past three years, and the Malays are also the majority race in Malaysia. The majority of the interviewees (15 out of 16) were majoring in communication as this is a compulsory course for all communication students in USM. Interestingly, a majority of the interviewees (12 out of 16) stated that they never knew about the course before attending it. The profiles of interviewees are displayed in Table 1. The interview data was analysed using Braun and Clarke's (2006) thematic analysis.

Table 1. Profile of interviewees

Year of completing course		2019	2020	2021
Number of interviewees		5	5	6
Identification code		(IV1-IV5)	(IV6-IV10)	(IV11-IV16)
Language				
	Malay	4	3	3
	English	1	2	3
Gender				
	Male	2	2	4
	Female	3	3	2
Race				
	Malay	2	3	3
	Chinese	–	2	2
	Indian	1	–	1
	Iban	1	–	–
	Kadazandusun	1	–	–
Majoring				
	Communication	5	5	5
	Humanities	–	–	1
Know about Sustainable Development Communication Before Attending the Course				
	Yes	2	2	–
	No	3	3	6

RESULTS

Overall, a majority of the interviewees answered the interview questions passionately. From the interview data analysis, the researchers discovered four major themes with regard to their perception on the offering of Communication for Sustainable Development course in USM, namely: 1) relevant course for students; 2) relevant course for sustainable university of USM; 3) unique focus of the course; and 4) crucial role of social media for sustainability communication. Each theme is discussed further in the following sections.

Relevant course for students

All interviewees who have taken and completed the Communication for Sustainable Development course unanimously agreed that the course is relevant to students, especially communication students. The majority of the interviewees agreed that the course has provided substantial exposure, particularly with information and understanding on the importance of sustainable development and sustainability, especially on environmental education and awareness. IV1, who is a communications major student, explained:

This course is very helpful to students in understanding the concept of sustainable development. (IV1)

Another interviewee, a humanities major, agreed with the views of IV1:

I think this course is very suitable for students majoring in communication, and also outside of communication school. I say this because based on my experience when undergoing this course, I have learnt a lot about the awareness of sustainability of our country and also our world. I have learnt the categories on which we can focus on when taking action to maintain good environment around us physically and mentally, and what we can do to achieve long lasting sustainability. (IV14)

Additionally, other interviewees also explained the relevance of the course to students based on the outcome of the course that taught them on how to communicate messages on sustainable development and sustainability information, or even propose effective ideas to related stakeholders. One interviewee who had completed the course in 2019 shared:

As a communication student, this course is important so that students can communicate the SDGs through the right platform while giving awareness to students to achieve SDG targets such as no poverty and hunger, gender discrimination and so on. (IV3)

Additionally, it is worth highlighting that only one interviewee highlighted the relevance of the course for future careers, especially for students who are interested to work with non-governmental organisations (NGOs):

I believe that this is an important course for communication students especially those who are thinking of pursuing to work at NGO/NPO (WWF, Greenpeace, etc). This course also helps students in understanding the interconnection of

SDGs and Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR) in a company, organization, or business. It also educates students to be a global citizen. (IV4)

Relevant course for sustainable university of USM

A majority of the interviewees described the Communication for Sustainable Development course as relevant to be offered in a university like USM, which is known as a garden university or a sustainable university. The interviewees felt that this course is important to be offered to USM students as it is in line with the sustainable brand and vision that USM espouses to:

Being a university that embraces sustainable lifestyle and also receiving the green campus sustainability award. I would say it is highly relevant as we get to set an example to not only government universities but also private universities to adapt to this behaviour as well. (IV11)

This course is relevant to be offered in USM. This is because USM has the name of the garden university which always evaluates, conserves and maintains the greenery of the campus as part of its efforts. (IV16)

In addition, one interviewee (ID IV6) also suggested that this course be offered to other relevant schools or faculties in USM.

Unique focus of the course

Based on the interview data, a majority of the interviewees highlighted that this course is unique as it has a specific focus on sustainable development and sustainability compared to other courses they had previously attended. Specifically, the course has exposed them to the holistic view of sustainability and the agenda of sustainable development through the communication perspective. As an interviewee who had completed the course in 2020 shared:

As a communication student majoring in Persuasive Communication, this course is quite unique. I perceived it to be a stand-alone course due to its focus and learning objectives that lean more towards sustainability. (ID IV4)

Echoing IV4, another interviewee (ID IV5) also agreed that this course pays attention to sustainable development, which distinguishes it from other communication courses:

Different because communication in [course] is more specialized in forming ideas and information related to sustainable development. (ID IV5)

Moreover, some of the interviewees mentioned that this course is unique as it is more issue-based and less theoretical in comparison to other courses. One interviewee highlighted:

This course is not theoretical but emphasizes on current issues. (ID IV12)

This course is more on sustainable, environmental, and social issues that are related to our daily life, which is different from other courses that are more about theories, media studies. (IV7)

Due to its reduced focus on theory, interviewees who have completed the course felt that the course is interesting, as it also focuses on the application of the knowledge in completing coursework tasks:

This course is different from other communication courses because this course does not need students to memorize too many communication theories, but [instead] apply communication knowledge in completing course work for this subject. (IV10)

Crucial role of social media for sustainability communication

Some of the interviewees also highlighted that social media is essential for current sustainability communication, which is also emphasised in the Communication for Sustainable Development course they attended. This is attributed to the affordances of social media in reaching audiences without boundaries, as cited by one of the interviewees:

I think it is essential to communicate sustainability issues in social media because social media can guarantee the dissemination of information with high achievement. In this digital era, social media has become a vital platform for every layer of society to obtain information, express their views and generate collective action. By using social media to increase and foster awareness of sustainability issues, the effort can be generated more comprehensively and have a more profound impact. (IV13)

Agreeing with IV13, another interviewee (IV1) also contended that social media is a powerful tool for sustainability communication due to its features that are simple and easy to use, as described below:

Social media is now the best platform for providing awareness and education to the general public on sustainability issues. People are more interested in knowing about an issue such as sustainability through social media because of its simple and compact nature. (IV1)

Moreover, some interviewees also agreed that social media is not only an important but also an effective tool for sustainability communication, as explained by two interviewees below:

In my opinion, it is effective to communicate sustainability on social media because social media has become one of the applications that need to be opened and always have to be “checked” in daily life. So, for example, if there is a post about sustainability, even if it is not viral, there will still be people who will see the post. (IV3)

In Malaysia, social media can be an effective tool to spread awareness and messages about sustainability. By combining creative elements and exposure that focus on environmental (and sustainability) issues, we can touch the hearts of many and motivate positive actions towards the environment. (IV7)

DISCUSSION

The findings of this study indicate that the Communication for Sustainable Development course is relevant to students. Thus, based on the Sustainability Vision Theory, the strong relevance of the course to the students indicates that USM has successfully communicated its sustainability vision to its students. Undoubtedly, such a course would be helpful and valuable by providing students with sustainability and communication knowledge, shaping their understanding, raising their awareness, and so forth. Nevertheless, knowledge acquisition only is not enough to mobilise change in society. Grounding on such views, a combination of various knowledge related to sustainability (e.g., values system, ethics) and practical values (i.e., knowing how to make use of the knowledge to act) is needed (Godemann & Michelsen, 2011). In the same context, previous research has proven the positive impact of sustainability communication and education on individuals' attitudes, perceived norms, and perceived behavioural control in addressing the issues of sustainability (Lertpratchya et al., 2017; Okubo et al., 2021).

The second finding concerns the relevance of the course to USM as a sustainable university. In this regard, previous research has shown that educational institutions such as sustainable universities are considered an effective communication medium in transferring knowledge related to sustainability to shape a sustainable future (Godemann & Michelsen, 2011; Lertpratchya et al., 2017; Sivapalan, 2017). For instance, courses like Communication for Sustainable Development may positively impact students' beliefs, attitudes, and intentions (Tang, 2018), and contribute to increasing awareness, development, and enhancement of the creative ability of students, as well as their competencies in sustainability communication, problem-solving and proactiveness, among others (Arief et al., 2022; Borhan & Ismail, 2011; Sivapalan, 2017). This would be very useful especially for their careers. As mentioned by several interviewees, acquiring extra knowledge on sustainability and sustainable development, in addition to communication, could add value to their employability, and give them an advantage over other graduates. Certainly, professional roles, like that of a communication officer for environmental non-governmental organisations, would require the communication graduate to have the relevant knowledge and skills in Sustainability Communication (Telles, 2015).

Moreover, our findings demonstrated that the Communication for Sustainable Development course reflects the organisational culture and the social responsibility of USM as a sustainable university that differentiates it from other local universities and corporations that also focus on a sustainability vision. Also, this course acts as a platform for two-way communication, which may contribute to the progress of sustainable development by enabling various stakeholders (e.g., students, educators, etc.) to interact and engage with each other through knowledge and value sharing, innovation, collaboration, co-creation, and so forth (Scandellius & Cohen, 2016). Without a doubt, all forms of communication are required for a university to commit to sustainability, especially for a university recognised as a "sustainable university" (Franz-Balsen & Heinrichs 2007; Mohamad Saleh et al., 2021; Mohamad Saleh et al., 2022). Eventually, any student who has graduated from a sustainable university should be able to carry and manifest the brand of sustainability irrespective of the career field they enter.

The third finding reflects the students' perception regarding the uniqueness of the Communication for Sustainable Development course. The interviewees had highlighted the uniqueness of this course in terms of its interdisciplinary nature — the coalescence between communication and sustainability. Indeed, the interdisciplinary study is considered trendy and necessary as graduates nowadays are expected to possess a wide range of expertise and

skills (Frodeman, 2016). Additionally, the interviewees also confirmed that the course is unique as it is issue-based. According to Holdsworth and Sandri (2021), a sustainability course that is focused on real issues is crucial as it can provide a more immersive experience for students who have yet to acquire real-world experience. In line with the findings of Okubo et al. (2021) in Japan, students enjoy the discussion on sustainability issues in class, especially on local issues, which is in contrast to teachers who prefer to focus more on international sustainability issues. Thus, this insight is highly valuable for future course developers and should be taken into consideration when developing a less theoretical and more issue-based course, and to link the content with other perspectives (interdisciplinary), to offer a Sustainability Communication course that is more interesting and relevant for the students. In this regard, Teoh and Yap (2018) reported that experiential learning positively impacts teaching perceptions and learning approaches. It makes the student more interested and engaged. However, more creative teaching techniques are needed in higher education institutions to make the teaching and learning process more enjoyable and effective. According to Teoh and Yap (2018), factors such as course content, assessment method, workload, and teaching method should be considered to make the teaching and learning process effective.

Undoubtedly, social media is one of the most effective ways to communicate various issues to the public, including environmental and sustainability concerns (Baran, 2023). This is in line with this research's findings, where some interviewees described the importance of social media as an effective tool for sustainability communication. This is because social media is highly used by society, and it is easy for them to access sustainability information without any time or space constraints. In fact, sustainability content on social media, such as awareness about poor communities, can enkindle people's emotions and propel them to take action to address and solve the problem. In line with this study's findings, Ballestar et al. (2020), through their social network analysis, found that sustainability is a part of the global conversation and attention, particularly on Twitter. Thus, considering the significant impact of social media, it is crucial for organisations, especially universities, to take advantage of it to widen students' and staff members' perspectives and knowledge on environmental sustainability (Hamid et al., 2017).

CONCLUSION

As a whole, sustainability has become a very important element that continues to underpin the principles of educational development in many disciplines in universities around the world (Salovaara et al., 2021). Communication studies at the School of Communication, USM is no exception. This kind of effort is utterly important to develop sustainability awareness among students and to secure their engagement on sustainability (Kanapathy et al., 2019).

The findings of the study provide empirical evidence on the relevance and importance of sustainability communication course for undergraduate students, especially those who are majoring in Communication. It is possible to say that for the students, the course is interesting and unique as it is not only less theoretical, and more issue-based, but it is also interdisciplinary. The findings and discussion of the study demonstrate that sustainability communication is important, and therefore, resolves the dilemma of having a separate course for sustainability-related issues in certain disciplines, such as communication.

As for the theoretical implication, it should be noted that the findings and discussion of the study have contributed to the knowledge base and literature in the field of Sustainability Communication and Education. For the practical implication, the

insightful findings offer a good guideline for university and course coordinators in developing sustainability communication strategies or sustainability education courses in the future.

Nevertheless, this study has several limitations. This is notably in its methodology, which employed the interview method with a small number of student respondents from one university in Malaysia. Thus, it is necessary for future research to consider interviewing the course instructors of the Communication for Sustainable Development course to obtain their perspectives for comparison. Furthermore, future research could also expand the scope of the study by including students from other Asian universities that offer similar sustainability communication courses.

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