

COMMUNICATING ENVIRONMENTAL RESPONSIBILITY: CSR BENIH BAIK AND THE CONSTRUCTION OF GARUDA INDONESIA'S GREEN AIRLINE IMAGE

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Abstract:

The intensification of global environmental crises has compelled the aviation sector to adopt Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR) not merely as a philanthropic obligation but as a vital strategic communication tool for reputation management. This study critically analyzes the "Benih Baik" initiative by Garuda Indonesia to understand how environmental CSR is mobilized to construct a "Green Airline" image. Integrating perspectives from Media Ecology, Stakeholder Engagement, and Greenwashing theories, the research explores the tension between symbolic communication and substantive impact. The study employs a qualitative single-case methodology, utilizing data triangulation from in-depth interviews with corporate communication practitioners, extensive documentation review, and digital media observations during the 2024–2025 period. The analysis reveals that Garuda Indonesia executes a systematic communication strategy characterized by "identity construction" positioning the airline as a guardian of national nature—and "visual persuasion," where digital content of mangrove planting serves as primary evidence of responsibility. Additionally, participatory messaging is used to foster a sense of collective ownership among stakeholders. However, a critical gap emerges: while the campaign succeeds in generating high visibility and emotional resonance, it notably lacks the disclosure of measurable ecological data, such as tree survival rates or quantified carbon offsets. This absence of verifiable outcomes suggests a reliance on "symbolic legitimacy," leaving the airline vulnerable to potential greenwashing critiques. The study concludes that sustainable reputation building in aviation requires a paradigm shift from performing visibility to proving ecological accountability, offering strategic insights for airlines operating in developing economies.

Keywords: *CSR Communication; Green Airline; Garuda Indonesia; Symbolic Legitimacy; Greenwashing; Media Ecology*

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INTRODUCTION

The intensification of environmental crises has heightened worldwide attention on businesses with significant ecological footprints, with aviation being one of the most often criticized sectors for its carbon emissions and intensive use of resources practices. Airlines globally are now anticipated to exceed operational compliance by exhibiting transparent sustainability communication. The "Green Airline" idea has arisen as a global standard, signifying a carrier's dedication to environmental stewardship, emissions reduction, and responsible practices. In this context, Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR) serves as a vital tool for establishing legitimacy and managing reputation, especially in high-risk and high-visibility sectors like aviation (Elkington, 1998; Porter & Kramer, 2011).

Garuda Indonesia is Indonesia's official airline and plays an important role in both domestic and international air travel. As of August 2025, the airline currently employs a total of 78 aircraft, indicating a recovery phase post-pandemic and enhanced operational capacity. This fleet includes narrow-body and wide-body aircraft, facilitating broad domestic and international route connectivity, thereby enhancing the company's visibility and social responsibility in the public sphere. Garuda's size and scope mean that any sustainability initiative it works on has a lot of symbolic weight when it comes to national connectivity and environmental responsibility standards.

In this configuration, environmental CSR particularly through the Benih Baik program carries strategic importance. Instead of functioning merely as a philanthropic gesture, such CSR initiatives act as communicative efforts to present Garuda as environmentally responsible, aligning with global "Green Airline" discourses. CSR messaging therefore serves to shape how stakeholders interpret the airline's values, especially as the aviation sector faces intensifying environmental criticism from governments, communities, and media globally.

Despite the increasing adoption of sustainability branding among international carriers such as KLM, Cathay Pacific, or Lufthansa, systematic scholarship on environmental CSR communication in the Indonesian airline sector remains limited. Much of the existing local CSR research still focuses on industries such as finance, manufacturing, or extractives resulting in a conceptual gap regarding CSR as a strategic communication tool in aviation. This gap becomes crucial as Southeast Asian airlines increasingly leverage sustainability narratives to compete in regional markets.

Given Garuda Indonesia's operational prominence, evolving fleet scale, and substantial public exposure, there is a strong rationale to examine how the airline

designs and communicates its environmental CSR initiatives and how these practices contribute to shaping a Green Airline image. This study therefore investigates message framing, media orchestration, stakeholder engagement, and visibility strategies embedded in Garuda Indonesia's CSR communication. Theoretically, the research extends CSR communication scholarship by contextualizing sustainability narratives within a high-visibility service industry. Practically, the findings provide insights for airlines in emerging economies seeking to align operational expansion with credible environmental reputation-building..

LITERATURE REVIEW

Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR) has evolved from a philanthropic obligation into a strategic organizational function shaped by legitimacy needs and societal expectations. Carroll (1991) conceptualizes CSR through four integrated responsibilities—economic, legal, ethical, and philanthropic—representing the corporate response to societal demands. Elkington's (1998) Triple Bottom Line expands this view by placing environmental stewardship as a fundamental determinant of long-term business sustainability. Within the aviation industry, CSR assumes heightened significance due to the sector's substantial contribution to carbon emissions and climate change risks (IATA, 2021). Accordingly, CSR becomes a primary vehicle for environmental accountability, allowing airlines to strengthen their social license to operate in the face of public scrutiny (Wang et al., 2018). For airlines like Garuda Indonesia, CSR is not merely about charity, but a strategic attempt to align corporate identity with global sustainability standards.

Effective CSR relies on how initiatives are communicated to and understood by the public. This study employs Stakeholder Engagement Theory (Freeman, 1984), which posits that organizations must treat stakeholders not as passive recipients but as active partners in value creation. In this view, communication functions as a semiotic practice where narrative credibility determines trust. This aligns with Grunig and Hunt's (1984) two-way symmetrical model, arguing that CSR communication must facilitate reciprocal understanding rather than one-directional publicity.

By engaging stakeholders such as local communities and passengers through participatory messages, airlines can transform environmental initiatives from corporate claims into collective movements. This theoretical lens is crucial for

analyzing how Garuda Indonesia involves the public to foster a sense of shared ownership in its sustainability programs.

Corporate image is defined as a cumulative perception derived from symbolic actions and stakeholder experience (Jefkins, 2006). In the aviation context, a "Green Airline" image emerges when environmental CSR is successfully integrated into the corporate identity. However, the construction of this image carries inherent risks. This study incorporates Greenwashing Theory to analyze the tension between communicated claims and actual performance. Delmas and Burbano (2011) describe greenwashing as the intersection of positive communication about environmental performance and poor or uncertain ecological drivers. If an airline's image building relies heavily on symbolic legitimacy (e.g., promotional branding) without substantive legitimacy (e.g., measurable ecological data), it creates a "legitimacy gap" (Ashforth & Gibbs, 1990). This framework helps explain the critical balance airlines must maintain between promoting their green identity and proving their tangible environmental impact.

The medium used to convey CSR messages fundamentally shapes how they are interpreted. Drawing on Media Ecology Theory, McLuhan (1964) asserts that "the medium is the message," highlighting that channels structure the epistemology of communication. In the current digital ecosystem, the dominant medium is highly visual and networked (Castells, 2012; Gillespie, 2023). For environmental communication, this implies that audiences often prioritize "visual evidence" (such as photos of tree planting) over complex textual data to assess credibility (Schultz et al., 2020). Therefore, in digital spaces, the visibility of action becomes a proxy for truth. This theory provides the basis for understanding why Garuda Indonesia's strategy prioritizes visual documentation on social media as the primary evidence of its environmental responsibility.

METHOD

This study employs a qualitative single-case study design to explore how sustainability communication constructs public meaning within a real-life organizational context. The case focuses on Garuda Indonesia's *Benih Baik* environmental CSR initiative as a bounded case that reflects strategic meaning-making practices in sustainability communication. A single-case approach is appropriate because Garuda Indonesia, as Indonesia's national flag carrier, represents a high-visibility and critical case for examining the construction of a Green Airline image in an emerging market environment.

The aim of the study is not to measure audience responses quantitatively, but to understand how communication practices create, negotiate, and reinforce environmental identity within corporate reputation work.

Furthermore, the table below presents an overview of the informants and data sources used in this study. Informants were selected through purposive sampling based on their direct involvement and experience in Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR) communication activities at Garuda Indonesia, particularly in relation to the *Benih Baik* program. Data were collected through in-depth interviews, analysis of official corporate documents, and media observation to obtain a comprehensive understanding of the company's CSR communication strategies and practices.

Table 1
Profile of Research Informants and Data Sources in Garuda Indonesia's CSR Communication

| Informant Code | General in the Organization | Role | Division/Unit | Data Type | Expertise / Qualification Background |
|----------------|-----------------------------------|-------------------------|-------------------------------|-------------------------------|---|
| I-1 | Senior Communication Practitioner | External Communication | Interview | Interview | Involved in sustainability communication strategy development |
| I-2 | Corporate Communicator | Corporate Communication | Interview | Interview | Manages CSR publications on official corporate channels |
| I-3 | CSR Implementation Staff | CSR & Sustainability | Interview | Interview | Directly engaged in the Benih Baik program activities |
| I-4 | Media & Digital Officer | Digital Communication | Interview + Media Observation | Interview + Media Observation | Manages visual content and CSR message dissemination |
| D-1 | Corporate Documents | - | Documentation | Documentation | Official CSR publications: website content, |

| | | | |
|------------|-------------------------|-------------------|---|
| | | | photos, program descriptions |
| M-1 | External Media Coverage | Media Observation | Online news and public reports regarding the Benih Baik program |

Based on Table 1 above, the research sample comprises a strategic mix of senior practitioners and operational staff, ensuring that insights cover both high-level policy making and ground-level execution. Table 1 shows that the informants represent key divisions—External Communication, Corporate Communication, and CSR Sustainability—providing a holistic view of how the "Benih Baik" narrative is constructed from multiple internal perspectives. The inclusion of external documents (D-1) and media coverage (M-1) further allows for data triangulation, validating internal claims against external representations.

This technique enabled the collection of information-rich insights grounded in practical knowledge. All participants were informed about the research purpose, and confidentiality, anonymity, and voluntary consent were strictly ensured.

Three complementary data collection techniques were employed to facilitate triangulation:

- a. Semi-structured interviews: Interviews explored strategic considerations behind CSR messaging, internal decision-making processes, and stakeholder interpretations of environmental communication. This format ensured thematic consistency while providing flexibility for deeper probing.
- b. Documentation review: Corporate profiles, online publications, and sustainability communication materials were reviewed to identify narrative structures of the Benih Baik CSR program, including textual explanations, visual documentation, and public reporting.
- c. Media observation: Relevant online media sources were examined to understand how external narratives frame Garuda Indonesia's environmental responsibility and how these narratives align or contrast with corporate messaging.

Data collection took place during the 2024–2025 CSR communication cycle, when environmental visibility became a strategic priority.

Data were analyzed using the interactive model of Miles, Huberman, and Saldaña (2014), involving:

1. Data reduction; coding and condensing data from interviews and documentation into meaningful thematic units
2. Data display; organizing coded data into matrices to visualize relationships among message framing, visibility strategies, and trust-building mechanisms
3. Conclusion drawing; interpreting patterns that explain how CSR communication contributes to Green Airline image formation

The coding process began with open coding to identify emergent insights, followed by axial coding to consolidate categories such as *environmental identity*, *visual storytelling*, *participatory messaging*, and *trust signaling*. Analytical memos were maintained to ensure traceability of interpretations throughout the analytic process.

RESULT AND DISCUSSION

This study aims to understand how Garuda Indonesia's CSR communication through the *Benih Baik* environmental initiative is strategically used to support the formation of a Green Airline image. Data were collected through semi-structured interviews with four communication practitioners directly involved in the program, digital media observation, and analysis of corporate documents. The analysis identified four major findings and one strategic gap in the communication practices.

Environment as an Expression of Corporate Identity

Garuda Indonesia positions environmental responsibility as a core part of its corporate identity. Informant I-1 stated that the company wants to be perceived not only as an aviation service provider but also as a national flag carrier that cares for Indonesia's natural environment. Corporate documents consistently emphasize the moral responsibility to protect coastal ecosystems as part of the company's identity.

This identity work is reflected in the choice of wording, the framing of messages, and the symbolic alignment between national representation (the airline as a country icon) and the nature that the company seeks to protect through the *Benih Baik* program.

Visualizing Action to Strengthen Perceived Credibility

All informants confirmed that visual documentation (photos and videos) is the most important element in Garuda's CSR communication. Images of mangrove planting activities are showcased across official digital channels and are frequently covered by external media.

Informant I-4 highlighted:

"Visuals are proof that we truly take action, not just talk."

Media observation also shows that visual content generates higher levels of engagement than textual information or corporate statements alone.

Participatory Messaging to Foster Public Closeness

The *Benih Baik* program is communicated as a **collective movement** involving local communities, volunteers, and employees. The messaging consistently highlights togetherness through the use of inclusive language such as "we," "together," and "everyone can contribute."

Informant I-2 stated:

"We want the public to feel that protecting the environment is not the task of one party, but a collaborative action."

Media content depicts community involvement not as passive recipients but as active actors in

Visibility Strategy through a Media Ecosystem

Garuda adopts a hybrid media strategy, combining owned media for narrative control and earned media for public legitimacy. According to Informant I-4:

"On our official channels, we control the message. On external media, we gain recognition."

Media observation confirms that coverage frequently appears in conjunction with event moments, showing a pattern of event-driven visibility.

Limited Communication of Ecological Outcomes

Despite intensive communication of planting activities, the public is not informed about actual ecological outcomes, including:

- survival rates of mangrove seedlings,
- restoration area achieved,
- long-term ecosystem impacts.

Informant I-3 acknowledged:

"We have not yet explained the ecological impact in a scientific and detailed manner."

This gap was consistently identified across all data sources. Overall, Garuda Indonesia applies CSR communication strategies that are strong in visibility and perception, yet not supported by measurable evidence of environmental impact. The strategy emphasizes how the company wants to be perceived, rather than what has been demonstrably achieved in ecological terms.

Table 2

CSR Communication Themes, Empirical Evidence, and Reputational Implications in Garuda Indonesia's Environmental Programs

| Main Theme | Empirical Evidence | Informant Quote | Conceptual Interpretation | Reputational Implication |
|-------------------------------|---|---|---|---|
| Environmental Identity | Narrative emphasis in corporate website & CSR documents | "We care about the environment..." (I-1) | CSR as organizational identity work | Elevated perception of environmental reputation |
| Action Visualization | Publication of photos/video s of mangrove planting activities | "Visuals are proof..." (I-4) | Emotional credibility through visual persuasion | Initial trust and environmental credibility established |
| Public Participation | Community and employees involved in CSR activities | "Everyone can join..." (I-2) | Trust mediation via inclusive engagement | Stronger public support and relational image |
| Media Ecosystem | Synergy of owned and earned media channels | "We control the message on official media..." (I-4) | Legitimacy reinforced through third-party recognition | Wider dissemination and public legitimacy |
| Impact Gap | No scientific data on ecological outcomes | — | Risk of greenwashing and symbolic legitimacy | Reputation remains vulnerable and not fully substantiated |

Based on Table 2 above, the analysis categorizes Garuda Indonesia's CSR communication into five distinct themes that collectively shape the airline's environmental image. Table 2 shows that while the first four themes—Environmental Identity, Action Visualization, Public Participation, and Media Ecosystem—successfully contribute to building a positive reputational image through symbolic and emotional appeals, the fifth theme reveals a critical vulnerability. The identified "Impact Gap" highlights that the absence of scientific ecological data creates a disconnection between the communicated narrative and

verifiable outcomes, posing a potential risk of greenwashing to the airline's long-term legitimacy.

The findings indicate that Garuda Indonesia's environmental CSR communication through the *Benih Baik* program operates as a symbolic process to construct a Green Airline image, rather than merely reporting technical environmental performance. Through strategic message framing, public involvement, and media visibility, the company seeks to shape a publicly recognized environmental reputation. To interpret the strategic nature of this communication, the findings are analyzed using several theoretical frameworks from sustainability and organizational communication.

First, the positioning of environmental issues as part of the company's identity aligns with the perspective of CSR as identity construction. Cornelissen (2017) explains that identity communication is a strategic effort by organizations to shape how stakeholders interpret "who the organization is." In a highly scrutinized aviation industry, CSR serves as a tool for legitimacy management (Suchman, 1995). By portraying itself as a guardian of the nation's nature, Garuda embeds national symbolism into its sustainability narrative — shifting public perception from *polluter* to *protector*. Thus, the company seeks both pragmatic and moral legitimacy through environmental responsibility.

Second, the emphasis on visual documentation reinforces the notion of visual persuasion in CSR. Visual depictions of mangrove planting create emotional closeness and strengthen perceived sincerity (Smith, 2021). In terms of legitimacy, such visuals reflect symbolic legitimacy (Bitektine, 2011), wherein stakeholders believe in corporate action because they can "see it." However, literature emphasizes that symbolic legitimacy must evolve into substantive legitimacy through demonstrable environmental outcomes (Ashforth & Gibbs, 1990). In Garuda's current practice, visuals serve as proof of action, but not yet proof of ecological impact due to the absence of measurable data.

Third, the participatory communication approach corresponds with Stakeholder Engagement Theory (Freeman, 1984), which posits that stakeholders must be treated as partners in value creation. Community involvement strengthens social trust, recognized as a key mediator between CSR initiatives and corporate reputation (Kim & Xie, 2020). In a collectivist cultural setting like Indonesia, participation fosters a shared sense of responsibility, making sustainability a collective commitment rather than a corporate claim. This alignment enhances reputational support because stakeholders see their identity reflected in the organization's environmental purpose.

Fourth, Garuda's hybrid media strategy demonstrates an understanding that reputation is shaped through message circulation within a dynamic media ecosystem. According to Media Ecology Theory (Castells, 2012), messages that are continuously amplified and validated by third-party media gain stronger public legitimacy than internal communication alone. However, the findings show that visibility remains strongly event-driven, making reputational gains less sustainable without a continuous communication strategy.

Fifth, the limited communication of ecological outcomes reveals a disconnection between claimed identity and demonstrated performance. This aligns with Greenwashing Theory, which argues that organizations risk being perceived as pursuing environmental image without real impact (Delmas & Burbano, 2011). When the public receives no information on rehabilitation effectiveness, a legitimacy gap emerges (Cho et al., 2015), indicating a mismatch between rising stakeholder expectations and insufficient transparency in reporting.

Overall, these findings suggest an inferential mechanism in Garuda Indonesia's CSR communication:

Figure 1. Trust-Mediated Mechanism in CSR Communication

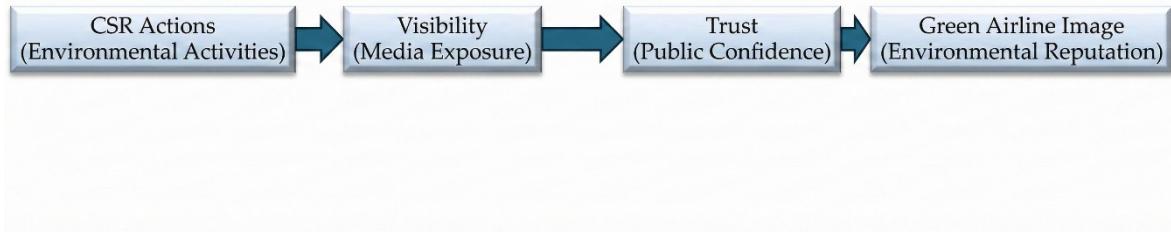


Figure 1 above illustrates the sequential mechanism identified in this study. It demonstrates that environmental activities (CSR Actions) do not directly translate into reputation; rather, they are mediated by 'Visibility' through media exposure. This visibility fosters 'Trust' (Public Confidence), which then serves as the critical bridge or mediator that ultimately crystallizes into the 'Green Airline Image'.

This study extends the existing CSR literature by explicitly framing environmental communication in the aviation sector as a mechanism of symbolic legitimacy construction rather than performance reporting. While previous studies

(e.g., Wang et al., 2018; Kim & Xie, 2020) have examined the correlation between CSR and trust, this research offers a novel perspective by illuminating the "Impact Gap" through the lens of Media Ecology. The novelty of this study lies in uncovering how digital visuality—acting as "proof of action"—can paradoxically mask the absence of substantive ecological data. This finding challenges the traditional assumption that transparent reporting is the sole driver of reputation in emerging markets, suggesting instead that visual persuasion and participatory framing effectively serve as powerful, albeit symbolic, substitutes for scientific accountability in the public eye.

CONCLUSION

This study concludes that Garuda Indonesia's environmental CSR communication through the "Benih Baik" program serves as a critical strategic instrument in shaping the company's "Green Airline" image. In the face of intensifying environmental scrutiny directed at the aviation industry, the airline utilizes CSR not merely as a philanthropic obligation but as a mechanism for reputation management.

The analysis identifies four strategic pillars that sustain this communication approach: (1) the construction of environmental responsibility as an intrinsic part of corporate identity, positioning the national flag carrier as a guardian of Indonesia's nature; (2) the utilization of action visualization—specifically mangrove planting—to enhance emotional credibility and provide "visible proof" of responsibility; (3) the deployment of participatory messaging to foster shared engagement and collective ownership among stakeholders; and (4) the implementation of a hybrid media strategy that leverages both owned channels and earned media to achieve third-party validation. These findings align with the reputation transfer model, suggesting that trust acts as a vital mediator between CSR activities and the formation of an environmental reputation.

The primary theoretical novelty of this study lies in conceptualizing the tension between symbolic legitimacy and substantive legitimacy within the context of an emerging market aviation sector. While previous scholarship has largely focused on the correlation between CSR reporting and corporate trust, this research extends the literature by demonstrating how Media Ecology influences legitimacy construction. The study reveals that in the digital ecosystem, "visual visibility" (photos of action) often supersedes "data verification" (scientific reports) in shaping public perception. This finding challenges the assumption that

transparent sustainability reporting is the sole driver of reputation. Instead, it argues that for airlines in developing economies, visual storytelling and participatory framing function as powerful symbolic substitutes for technical accountability, effectively shielding the organization from immediate legitimacy threats even in the absence of comprehensive ecological data.

From a managerial perspective, the study highlights that while symbolic communication is effective for initial image building, it carries long-term risks. The findings expose a critical "impact gap"—a disconnection between the high visibility of planting activities and the low transparency of their actual ecological results. As long as communication focuses solely on the *activity* rather than the *outcome*, the airline's reputation remains at a symbolic stage. This creates a vulnerability to accusations of greenwashing, especially as stakeholders become more environmentally literate and demanding of evidence.

To transition from symbolic image-building to substantive environmental leadership, it is recommended that Garuda Indonesia shifts its strategy from "showing actions" to "proving outcomes." Specifically, the airline should begin to report measurable ecological outcomes, such as mangrove survival rates, total area restored, and quantifiable carbon sequestration metrics. Future communication should not only document the *event* of planting but also the *progress* of the ecosystem over time.

Additionally, to enhance credibility, the airline should collaborate with academic institutions or environmental experts to validate these data points, ensuring that the "Benih Baik" program is scientifically defensible. Future research in this field should further investigate this transition by measuring how the inclusion of scientific ecological data in CSR messages influences stakeholder trust compared to purely emotional or visual appeals. Ultimately, sustainability communication must evolve to treat environmental performance not just as a narrative to be told, but as a measurable reality to be verified.

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