

Communication Research Methods in Studying Sustainable Development Goals in the Philippines

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ABSTRACT

Communication is essential in achieving the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). Yet, it can be less apparent, especially for beginning researchers, to articulate how the *study* of communication contributes to SDGs. As such, this essay presented some topics and methods that communication research students can pursue. As a guide on communication research methods, the author referred to the work, *A Primer on Communication and Media Research*, edited by Paragas (2021). To situate these methods to SDGs, the author highlighted some of the 17 goals and contextualized them in the Philippine setting through previous studies, reports, and statistical data. Ultimately, research paths were identified, which include (1) a content analysis of materials produced by companies promoting SDGs 4 and 9; (2) a textual analysis of the metaphors in a film as commentary to SDGs 1 and 2; (3) a survey reception analysis of a climate change documentary related to SDG 13; (4) an experiment to establish how such documentary can cause attitude change or (5) a qualitative reception analysis to see how audiences make meaning of it. Moreover, students could consider (6) an autoethnography of marginalized individuals and groups in the agriculture sector to address the country's SDG 8; (7) a virtual ethnography of how social media mediates social interactions of Overseas Filipino Workers (OFWs) with SDG 3 problems on health and well-being; and (8) a case study of the South-South Cooperation (SSC) between the Philippines and Indonesia about SDG 17. Overall, this essay attempts to contribute to a more localized application of communication research methods to the SDG research agenda of schools and the nation.

Keywords: *Communication Research Methods, SDG, Philippine Communication Research, Philippine SDG, Communication Study*

Introduction

Through the 17 Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), the United Nations (UN) sets the agenda for all countries to achieve by 2030. As seen in Figure 1, these goals include reducing poverty, ensuring health and well-being, and providing quality education. With a plethora of topics to research, scholars have joined the SDG pursuit with several universities here in the Philippines, setting it as one of their research agendas.

Figure 1

The 17 Sustainable Development Goals Poster (UN News Centre, 2015)



However, a review of more than 5,000 studies published on SDG worldwide would show a dominance of green and environmental sciences (Sianes et al., 2022). For us in the communication field, especially emerging researchers, one may wonder where and how we can contribute. What can we study? This essay then brainstorm some topic ideas for communication undergraduate students and beginning researchers to go into doing our part in achieving the SDGs.

Cobley and Schulz (2013) described communication science in two broad approaches: a semiotic or linguistic approach related to humanities and a quantitative approach leaning more toward social sciences. This means that there is a variety of communication research methods—quantitative, qualitative, or both—that you can consider as a communication scholar. Remember, however, that the choice of research method ultimately depends on its suitability to your topic, your framework, and what the previous literature tells you.

To organize this essay, I followed the authors' discussion in *A Primer on Communication and Media Research* (Paragas, 2021). I proposed research topics that undergraduate students can do in one subject for at least a semester. In my

attempt to provide topic ideas, I cited specific SDGs and gave some context on their state in the country.

Researching on Materials

This section discusses two research methods you could consider if you want to research materials. My students find this path useful, especially with more and more content available to explore online. In my experience of doing research and advising students, researching publicly available materials can be practical in a sense that the data gathering can be faster compared to those methods involving human participants.

A Quantitative Content Analysis

Documents and other materials on SDGs are rich sources of data. You may, for example, want to see how “development” is being communicated in the country by tallying the development-related words from a large sample of posters produced on SDGs. A *quantitative content analysis* can help you with that. You can also look into Philippine government websites and news reports, or count the most talked about SDGs on Facebook comments during the height of the COVID-19 pandemic. Most likely, you will find patterns across data, and you can get insights into how SDGs are being communicated in our country. One of the strengths of this method is that it allows you to cover vast amounts of data through time (Paragas & Pernia, 2021).

Try not to count everything though. You can be more specific, say to materials on SDGs produced by companies in the Philippines. For example, Ike and colleagues (2019) found that multinational enterprises, including those in the Philippines, do prioritize some SDGs including SDGs 4 (Quality Education) and 9 (Industry, Innovation, and Infrastructure). You may then ask, how do companies communicate certain SDGs through the memos they send to their employees or the materials they publish in public?

A Qualitative Textual Analysis

Insights from tallying can be useful in describing how SDGs are communicated in the country but this will not provide the whole picture. At times, a closer look may be needed if you want to unravel further context in a material. For example, the movie *The Platform* (Gaztelu-Urrutia, 2019) may not explicitly say SDG, but you may explore how it can be a social commentary on SDGs 1 (No Poverty) and 2 (No Hunger). If you are doing a *qualitative textual analysis*, you may study signs, the narrative of the film, or the rhetorical strategies used. You may look into the metaphors used in the film and put them in the Philippine context. For example, how does the vertical prison relate to how Raquiza (2019) described *vertical inequality* or unequal distribution of wealth in the Philippines? What does the theme of overconsumption of food have to comment about the sustainability of resources in the country? Or take a critical stance by asking, how are women

and children portrayed in this film? How does the film reflect normalized societal notions of them?

A caution in textual analysis though is that it can be difficult to perform in the sense that the researcher must practice self-direction. Some forms of textual analysis, like discourse analysis, may also require the researcher a sense of maturity (Paragas, 2021). Moreover, someone doing this method must be comfortable with their subjectivity and use it as the very impetus in analyzing texts (Baldo-Cubelo, 2021).

Researching on Audiences

Content analysis and textual analysis can tell you many things about a material, but I tell my students to be careful in inferring about the audiences of these materials through such methods. If you want to focus on the audience, Bunquin and Solis (2021) suggested that you can do a reception analysis (quantitative, qualitative, or mixed) or even do an experiment. These paths will be explored in this section.

Survey

The Netflix documentary *Kiss the Ground* (Tickell & Tickell, 2020) attempts to explain climate change and the ways we can preserve the planet by changing our ways. This documentary relates to the targets of SDG 13 (Climate Action). So, to know how individuals receive the documentary, you can survey with an ample sample size to represent a population. Applying San Pascual and Bunquin's (2021) guide on quantitative data analysis and interpretation, you can measure the attitude and agreement of audiences on the documentary through a descriptive analysis. Through correlation, you may also see if there is a directional relationship between their attitude and agreement on the work and their willingness to choose regenerative food. Furthermore, you may tell something about a population through inferential statistics. For example, you may further look into whether there are significant differences in attitude, agreement, and willingness among groups such as age, gender, and socioeconomic class. You may also ask respondents to describe the film in a few words, and then code and tally the responses.

Experiments

The results of such surveys can already help governments look for ways to utilize media in promoting SDGs. However, note that surveys alone cannot establish causation (San Pascual, 2021). If you want to know with more certainty if the documentary *caused* willingness to change one's diet, you may need to incorporate surveys for pretest and posttest in an experiment (Umali, 2021). In an experimental design, you can imagine a setup where you will make one group watch the documentary and see if there is a change in their willingness to change the way they eat. You may also need another group that you will *not* expose to

that documentary and see where there is a significant difference from the first group who watched the material.

Experimenting can be difficult to do as it needs methodological thoroughness, time, and resources, as seen in the discussion of Umali (2021). As such, I have not encountered many communication students who opted this method despite a lot of topic pitches wanting to establish causation (e.g., “influence of”, and “effects of”). For one, you have to account for other variables that may affect a behavior change. In any way, there are several experiment designs that you can look further into if you are keen to see what causes what with more certainty (Umali, 2021).

Interviews and Focus Group Discussions

Surveys and experiments are quantitative methods with generalizability as an important criterion of good research (Baxter & Babbie, 2003). In other words, the results found here should tell something about a larger group of people. While these results inform nationwide policies, the UN SDG also commits to *leaving no one behind* (“Leaving no one behind,” n.d.) as evident in its many targets. As such, this includes individuals who did not belong to the majority as per statistics, or those who described the film as “annoying” where other respondents answered words related to empowerment.

In this case, it may be helpful to turn to a qualitative version of reception analysis. One popular framework used by my students would be the encoding/decoding model of Stuart Hall (in Griffin et al., 2019). Following Hall, you may investigate how audiences interpret a text, whether dominant, negotiated, or oppositional (in Bunquin & Solis, 2021). According to Baxter and Babbie (2003), you may do interviews if your studied individuals have unique experiences of their own regarding a phenomenon. Meanwhile, the authors noted that a focus group discussion would be fit if you are leaning to see how they interpret materials as a homogenous group. While findings may not be as generalizable as surveys and experiments, the point is that they should not be anyway. The point is that if we want solutions to global problems that leave no one behind, the solutions must acknowledge the subjectivity of individuals.

Researching on Culture

The former discussion on qualitative reception analysis provides a glimpse of cultural studies. According to Baran & Davis (2012) communication and media scholars leaning toward this path asks “how people negotiate common meaning and are bound” (p. 227). The next two research methods presented in this section offer ways that a communication researcher can study culture, may it be by including the self as part of a culture or by immersing with a culture that is not necessarily bounded by physical space.

Autoethnography

For one, you may consider doing an *autoethnography* where the author can write a first-hand account of their experience and “how this intertwined with the culture being studied” (Lomibao, 2021, p. 35).

Now, how does this perspective apply to SGDs? Understanding the shared experiences of individuals with their groups can aid an authentic participatory take on sustainable development where, as Mefalopulos (2005) describes, individuals are active in the decision-making process. In other words, to develop interventions that are truly sustainable, these interventions must make sense to the groups who are supposed to benefit from them.

Let us take, for example, the worrisome situation of the agricultural sector in the Philippines. SDG 8 aims to ensure decent work and economic growth; however, reports show that the agricultural sector is the most left out among all sectors in the country. This sector had the highest underemployment rate across sectors (Reyes et al., 2019); a majority of informal employment within its sector (Raquiza, 2019); and a high proportion of Filipino youth unemployed (Yap et al., 2020). Moreover, the agriculture sector can be disadvantaged in economic growth efforts such as in the case of the country’s ‘build, build, build’ infrastructure program. Serrano (2019) reported that the program did good in terms of the annual economic growth target, although this also prompted those working in agriculture to go into construction instead.

Considering these reports, a communication researcher, if belonging to the same group (e.g., working in agriculture), may conduct an autoethnography to reflect on their own experiences of employment as shared with the group they belong to. By describing and understanding where a group is coming from, a communication researcher may suggest ways to ensure their sustainable participation in programs that are by them and for them.

Virtual Ethnography

In contrast with the country’s downward agriculture output, Overseas Filipino workers (OFWs) are considerable contributors to the country’s economic growth through large-scale remittance inflow (Raquiza, 2019). However, researchers have revealed that OFWs, particularly domestic workers, have developed negative habits, experienced physical and mental health issues, and endured a lack of access to healthcare while away from the Philippines (Hall et al., 2019). While working abroad may contribute to SDG 8, it should be a concern regarding the country’s SDG 3 (Good Health and Well-Being).

Similarly, research-based and context-specific programs must be done to ensure the health and well-being of our workers abroad. However, the diasporic situation of our OFWs can be a barrier to ethnography in a natural and physical setting, especially for domestic work. In this case, a communication researcher may consider a *virtual ethnography*. As Lomibao (2021) pointed out, this emerging type of ethnography focuses on the “study of people, communities, and cultures that are formed through computer-mediated social interaction” (p. 35).

An example of a computer-mediated social interaction could be a live video on social media that recently went viral. In this video, a female OFW recorded her foreign employer physically assaulting her and accusing her of stealing (GMA Integrated News, 2023). The Facebook comment section was flooded with sympathies and tags to Philippine authorities, including those from OFW themselves, to help the woman as they understand what she was going through. This was not the first time social media was used to air the grievances of OFWs. Communication research may then focus on how virtual spaces have mediated the social interactions of OFWs as they share experiences of physical and mental abuse. You may ask, how do they build a sense of community and support? How do they maintain their relationships and air their grievances? How can the use of online communication channels help with health and well-being (SDG 3)?

Researching on Communication Processes

Finally, a communication researcher may incorporate a combination of previously discussed research methods and look into the bigger picture of communication processes. In this case, you may need to employ a *case study* that can provide a “holistic look into the nature and process of the communication event being studied” (Labor, 2021, p. 56). Now, it would be self-evident that working towards SDGs would entail communication processes, including cooperation among countries. This may fall under SDG 17 (Partnerships for the Goals), which includes enhancing South-South Cooperation (SSC) (United Nations, n.d.). SSC is when at least two developing countries partner towards a mutually beneficial goal. In this case, Olarte (personal communication, December 7, 2022) identified effective communication strategies as necessary in such partnerships.

Applying to the local context, a case study researcher may focus on SSC between the Philippines and Indonesia. Abad (2022) reports that the two countries, with over 70 years of diplomatic relations, have been helping each other through trade. The Family Planning Advocacy in Muslim Philippines, for example, is also one of the SSC projects between the two nations (Olarte, personal communication, December 7, 2022)

Aside from these, SSC has many possibilities between the Philippines and Indonesia. For example, The Philippines can learn from Indonesia’s political will in obliging businesses to practice corporate social responsibility (Nisa et al., 2021) and their comprehensive health inequality monitoring (Hosseinpour, et al., 2018). We can also learn about the rights of workers (De Ruyter & Rachmawati, 2020), people with mental health concerns (Bikker et al., 2021), and persons with disabilities (PWDs) (Anomsari & Mursalim, 2020). On the other hand, the Philippines can also help with the SDG challenges in Indonesia. For instance, Anggia and Teuku (2018) believed that the Philippines is doing well regarding migrant workers’ empowerment, citing the country’s capacity building, which includes intercultural competence training.

All these considered, a communication researcher may suggest communication strategies to apply in these partnership potentials. SSC is a communication phenomenon where countries from various cultures collaborate toward a mutual goal. You may focus on an SSC project and document “how it develops or degenerates, and why it grows or declines” (Labor, 2021, p. 56). In doing so, you might employ various methods previously discussed. For instance, you may interview key informants involved and conduct a document analysis on materials related to the project.

Conclusion

This essay has so far introduced some possibilities for communication students to research SDGs: a content or textual analysis of materials; a survey, experiment, or a qualitative reception study of audiences; an autoethnography and virtual ethnography of marginalized groups; or a case study of south-south cooperation as a communication process.

By no means is what was presented here exhaustive; instead, this essay just shows the many prongs from which you can contribute to sustainable development. To find a topic, you could look around the popular culture you consume, chat with your friends, and reflect on your experiences. You may also start by accessing SDG Watch infographics on the Philippine Statistics Authority website (“Sustainable Development Goals,” n.d.). And once you have a topic, you go further. Attach it to a more profound discourse by reading previous literature and studies.

It would help to have some favorite references, too. I, for example, like how Craig (1999) mapped the communication field through traditions. Aside from Paragas’s communication and media research primer (2021), you may also see Baxter and Babbie’s (2003) handbook. If you are having difficulty comprehending some scholars’ writings on communication theories, try reading Griffin et al. (2019) and Baran and Davis (2012).

Finally, I hope you find a mentor who aligns with your work. Sustainable development is a collective work; know that you can contribute to it. Good luck!

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