

# Sustainability Communication Strategies by Women Coffeepreneurs in Toraja

Isma Azis Riu<sup>1\*</sup>

<sup>1\*</sup>Management Department, Faculty of Economics and Business, Universitas Negeri Makassar, Indonesia

Email: [ismaazisriu@unm.ac.id](mailto:ismaazisriu@unm.ac.id)

Received: 3 October 2025

Accepted: 17 November 2025

Published online: 18 November 2025

## Abstract

This study examines how women coffee entrepreneurs (coffeepreneurs) in Toraja, Indonesia, communicate sustainability practices within their unique socio-cultural context. Using a qualitative case study approach, the research engaged fifteen women coffeepreneurs through in-depth interviews, participant observation, and analysis of textual artifacts to understand their narrative strategies, channel selection, and negotiation of gendered constraints. Findings reveal that these women employ three key communicative practices: (1) cultural anchoring of sustainability messages through ancestral stewardship narratives and moral idioms; (2) multimodal bricolage combining oral traditions, digital platforms, and community networks; and (3) strategic storytelling that leverages care-based expertise to assert authority in male-dominated spaces. The study identifies significant tensions between affective storytelling and market demands for verifiable claims, highlighting how digital platforms both amplify and complicate sustainability communication. Results underscore the importance of co-designed capacity-building programs that enhance communicative competencies while respecting cultural frameworks. The research concludes that supporting women's communicative agency requires hybrid approaches that integrate culturally resonant narratives with accessible verification mechanisms, ultimately contributing to more equitable and sustainable value chains.

**Keywords:** Sustainability Communication; Women Coffeepreneurs; Cultural Narratives; Value Chain Integration; Gendered Entrepreneurship.

## 1. Introduction

Sustainability communication by small-scale producers has become a critical site where ecological stewardship, market legitimacy, and social justice intersect. Women coffee entrepreneurs in Toraja occupy a unique position at this intersection, mediating between ancestral land ethics and global consumer expectations.

This mediation is particularly significant in an era where global markets increasingly demand verifiable sustainability credentials while local communities seek to preserve cultural integrity. Women coffee entrepreneurs must navigate complex value chains while maintaining the cultural authenticity that gives Torajan coffee its distinctive market appeal. Their communicative practices thus serve as crucial bridges between local wisdom and global market expectations, creating new possibilities for valuing indigenous knowledge in sustainable agriculture. Toraja's coffee culture is embedded in a landscape of steep terraces, ritualized land use, and communal labor practices; these cultural formations shape how sustainability is



conceived and narrated locally. The region's coffee is not merely an agricultural product but also a cultural artifact whose value depends on stories about place, lineage, and craftsmanship.

The deep cultural embeddedness of Torajan coffee production means that sustainability narratives are inherently intertwined with cultural preservation. Women coffee entrepreneurs often frame environmental stewardship as an extension of ancestral obligations to maintain harmony between human communities and the natural world. This cultural framing provides a powerful foundation for sustainability communication that resonates with both local values and the growing global market segment seeking authentic, culturally-grounded products.

Contemporary pressures—climate variability, shifting international quality standards, and volatile commodity prices—make effective communication of sustainable practices a strategic necessity for coffee microenterprises. Women who lead or participate in these enterprises must simultaneously manage production, social relations, and market relations.

These intersecting pressures have created a challenging environment where traditional knowledge must be continuously adapted and effectively communicated to maintain market position. Climate variability, in particular, has forced women coffee entrepreneurs to develop new narratives that explain both their adaptive practices and their ongoing commitment to sustainable production. Their communication strategies thus reflect dynamic negotiations between maintaining cultural authenticity and responding to rapidly changing environmental and market conditions.

Despite their central role, the communicative practices of women coffeepreneurs—how they frame sustainability for buyers, how they rely on interpersonal versus digital channels, and how they negotiate gendered constraints—remain under-documented. Understanding these practices can reveal mechanisms by which local sustainability knowledge gains legitimacy and economic value.

The communicative strategies employed by these women represent sophisticated forms of cultural translation that have evolved to address specific market opportunities and constraints. Many have developed hybrid approaches that combine digital tools with deeply relational communication styles, creating unique brand identities that stand out in a crowded marketplace. Their success in navigating gendered expectations while building sustainable businesses offers valuable insights for gender-inclusive rural development strategies.

This study is urgent because (1) women's communicative agency affects resource governance and household welfare; (2) market access increasingly depends on credible sustainability narratives; and (3) Toraja's culturally grounded approaches may offer replicable models for culturally sensitive sustainability communication elsewhere.

The urgency is compounded by rapid changes in both environmental conditions and market structures that threaten to marginalize small-scale producers who cannot effectively communicate their sustainability practices. As certification systems and market platforms become more standardized, there is a real risk that the distinctive cultural dimensions of Torajan sustainability practices may be rendered invisible or illegible to global markets, potentially undermining both cultural preservation and economic viability.

The research aims to examine the strategies by which women coffeepreneurs in Toraja construct, perform, and circulate sustainability claims; to identify enabling and constraining factors; and to assess implications for policy and practice.

By documenting and analyzing these communicative strategies, this research seeks to develop more culturally responsive frameworks for sustainability communication that can enhance market access while respecting cultural integrity. The findings aim to inform both local development initiatives and global sustainability standards, creating pathways for more equitable recognition of women's contributions to sustainable agriculture and for more meaningful integration of cultural values into market-based sustainability initiatives.

## 2. Literature Review

Sustainability communication is a polyvalent field encompassing environmental messaging, corporate transparency, and participatory narratives that co-produce meaning between senders and audiences. Scholarship shows that social media and mediated platforms amplify moralized content and can accelerate both virtuous collective action and polarized responses, implying that digitally mediated sustainability claims gain emotional traction but are also susceptible to moral contestation (Bavel et al., 2023).

Practical training in science and sustainability communication improves the ability of non-experts to tailor messages to diverse audiences; baseline competencies such as audience choice, media selection, and plain-language translation determine communicative effectiveness for environmental topics (Shivni et al., 2021). These competencies are relevant when coffeepreneurs present technical claims (e.g., organic practice, biodiversity conservation) to non-technical consumers.

Transitions in value chains toward circular or sustainable forms require interorganizational sensemaking: diverse stakeholders must align frames, expectations, and identities to collaborate effectively (Kuhlmann et al., 2023). For smallholders and microenterprises, such alignment occurs not only between firms but also between producers, cooperatives, buyers, and certification bodies.

Communication is a coordination problem shaped by linguistic conventions and contextual cues; synthesizing communication theory and grammar highlights that messages succeed when microconventions enable shared interpretation and reduce ambiguity (Scott-Phillips, 2025). For women coffeepreneurs, the choice of narrative structures and local linguistic forms thus matters for interpretive clarity.

Gendered expectations and essentialist beliefs can shape opportunities and constrain learning affordances, thereby influencing occupational trajectories and the kinds of communicative roles women are offered or expected to perform (Aday et al., 2025). In coffee value chains, such dynamics may limit access to technical certification processes or leadership in buyer negotiations.

Leadership behavior during crisis contexts suggests that communal, relational communication often gains salience and perceived competence, and women's communicative styles—when recognized—can be assets in mobilizing collective responses to adversity (Eichenauer et al., 2021). Applied to coffee communities facing climate shocks, relational messaging may be both culturally resonant and strategically effective.

More generally, women's entrepreneurship is inextricably shaped by local culture, role expectations, and institutional environment; cultural dimensions condition how women narrate business identity and the social legitimacy of their ventures (Bullough et al., 2021). Thus,

Toraja's cultural scripts around honor, reciprocity, and kinship likely structure women's sustainability narratives.

Recent operations research points to technological innovations such as blockchain that can enhance transparency and trust in agricultural supply chains, potentially complementing narrative-based trust with verifiable traceability; yet such technologies require awareness, infrastructural support, and collective alignment to be effective (Nayal et al., 2021; Petratos & Faccia, 2023; Yavaprabhas et al., 2022). For Toraja coffee entrepreneurs, technological options could augment but not replace culturally grounded communication.

### 3. Method

This study used a qualitative case study design to capture the interpretive richness of how women coffee entrepreneurs in Toraja communicate sustainability. Emphasis was placed on voice, practice, and situated meaning rather than quantification.

Sampling was purposive and criterion-based: women involved in coffee production, processing, roasting, or marketing in North and South Toraja were recruited to include diversity in age, cooperative membership, market orientation (local, national, export), and digital engagement. Fifteen participants provided a balance of depth and breadth.

Data collection combined semi-structured in-depth interviews, participant observation at processing sites and local markets, and analysis of textual artifacts (product labels, social media posts, cooperative minutes, and promotional leaflets). Interviews focused on narrative strategies, audience targeting, perceived barriers, and examples of successful or failed communications.

Fieldwork prioritized ethical engagement—obtaining informed consent, ensuring anonymity, and conducting member-checks where participants reviewed summaries of findings for accuracy. Local language (Bahasa Indonesia and Torajan dialects) was used in interviews to preserve nuance.

Data analysis followed inductive thematic analysis procedures. Transcripts and field notes were coded iteratively to identify recurring patterns, divergent cases, and tensions between tradition and market exigencies. Triangulation across data sources strengthened credibility.

Reflexivity was maintained throughout: the researcher kept a field journal noting power dynamics, researcher positionality, and moments where interpretation risked imposing external frames on participants' meanings.

### 4. Results and Discussion

Participants included a range of profiles: smallholder producers selling cherries to cooperatives, women operating micro-roasteries with direct-to-consumer sales, café owners who blend cultural tourism with coffee, and cooperative leaders engaged in certification efforts. Ages spanned late twenties to late fifties; years active ranged from three to over twenty.

A compact summary table below represents anonymized participant attributes and communication platforms used.

**Table 1** summarizes.

Participant	Role	Years Active	Cooperative Membership	Primary Communication Channels
P1	Micro-roaster & marketer	5	No	Instagram, local markets
P2	Farm & café owner	12	Yes	WhatsApp groups, community events
P3	Cooperative secretary	15	Yes	Meetings, radio, certification docs
P4	Smallholder producer	20	No	Religious gatherings, neighbor networks
P5	Export-oriented microenterprise	8	Yes	LinkedIn, email, trade fairs

Source: data processed, 2025

Three primary thematic clusters emerged: (1) cultural anchoring of sustainability messages; (2) multimodal bricolage of communication channels; and (3) strategic storytelling that negotiates gendered authority.

**Cultural anchoring:** Participants routinely situate sustainability within Toraja moral idioms—references to ancestral stewardship, reciprocal labor obligations, and the notion of communal honor informed how they justified ecological practices. These frames made sustainability meaningful to local audiences and served as authenticity signals for external consumers.

**Multimodal bricolage:** Women combined oral traditions (storytelling at markets and ritual events), peer networks (WhatsApp and cooperative meetings), and select digital platforms (Instagram for visual storytelling; LinkedIn or trade fair presence for international buyers). Platform choice aligned with audience: intimate, local claims were conveyed orally; status-differentiated claims were mediated visually and textually for wider markets.

**Strategic storytelling and gender:** Participants used narrative techniques to assert competence—sharing process transparency (open kitchens), testimonials from buyers, and lineage narratives that linked coffee quality to maternal care and intergenerational knowledge. Such stories functioned to negotiate male-dominated decision spaces by reframing authority as care-based expertise.

Barriers identified included inconsistent internet access, limited digital literacy, constrained access to formal certification resources, and intra-household time burdens that limited participation in external events. Participants noted that while story-based branding elicited consumer empathy, buyers sometimes demanded verifiable evidence—creating a tension between affective narrative and instrumentally verifiable claims.

#### 4.1. Discussion

The cultural rooting of sustainability messages shows how local moral vocabularies can serve as both an anchor for community legitimacy and a distinctive brand asset in external markets. Toraja women’s use of ancestral narratives operates as a trust-building mechanism that resonates with consumers seeking ethical provenance. This correspondence between cultural authenticity and market differentiation underscores how narrative economies can capture value without relying solely on technical certifications.

At the same time, social media dynamics—where moral and emotionally charged content tends to propagate—create opportunities and risks: affectively potent stories can increase visibility, but they can also attract contestation or moral scrutiny from distant publics (Bavel et al., 2023). Women coffeepreneurs must therefore balance evocative storytelling with credibility markers that withstand external evaluation.

Training and capacity-building in communication techniques would benefit these producers. Foundational competencies—audience targeting, message clarity, multimodal media use—are teachable and improve translation of technical sustainability practices into accessible narratives (Shivni et al., 2021). Programs should emphasize pragmatic exercises that align local narratives with evidence-based claims, enabling producers to maintain authenticity while meeting buyer expectations.

Interorganizational alignment across value chains matters: when cooperatives, buyers, and certification entities engage in sensemaking together, they can co-construct mutually intelligible frames for sustainability that reconcile local practice with market criteria (Kuhlmann et al., 2023). Facilitated forums where women coffee entrepreneurs, cooperative managers, and buyers deliberate on definitions, metrics, and evidence can reduce misalignment and strengthen mutual trust.

Linguistic and semiotic choices help reduce ambiguity; adopting microconventions—consistent labeling phrases, images, and storytelling structures—improves interpretive coordination across audiences (Scott-Phillips, 2025). For instance, a standardized narrative template that includes origin story, farming practice, and verification statement can work across oral and digital media.

Gender dynamics shape the communicative ecology. Essentialist biases about women's roles can limit access to technical learning and negotiation opportunities, producing self-reinforcing patterns unless actively countered through targeted capacity-building and structural changes that expand women's affordances (Aday et al., 2025). Interventions must avoid reproducing gendered role assignments and instead expand the range of communicative and leadership tasks women can perform.

Communal leadership norms that emphasize relational communication can be leveraged in crisis or adaptation contexts. Women's relational narratives—centred on care and reciprocity—may be particularly effective in mobilizing collective responses to climate-induced harvest shocks or pest outbreaks (Eichenauer et al., 2021). Recognizing and resourcing these communicative strengths can enhance resilience planning.

Cultural expectations around entrepreneurship must be considered: women's business practices are embedded in social norms that simultaneously enable and constrain innovation (Bullough et al., 2021). Policies and programs should therefore be culturally sensitive, recognizing local practices while addressing structural barriers such as market access, credit, and time poverty.

Technology holds promise but is not a panacea. Blockchain and traceability solutions can function as institutional trust devices that complement narrative trust by providing verifiable records of origin and practice (Nayal et al., 2021; Yavaprabhas et al., 2022). However, technological interventions must be matched with digital literacy, infrastructural investment, and cooperative governance mechanisms; otherwise, they risk privileging actors with resources and marginalizing smallholders (Petratos & Faccia, 2023).

The study reveals a productive tension between narrative authenticity and evidentiary verification. While storytelling mobilizes empathy and market differentiation, buyers increasingly demand verifiable claims; therefore, communicative strategies must integrate affective and cognitive elements to be persuasive across constituencies. Aligning narrative credibility with traceable evidence will be crucial for long-term market positioning.

Power asymmetries within cooperatives and market chains continue to shape whose narratives are amplified. Even when women craft compelling sustainability stories, men in gatekeeping positions may control certification resources or export channels. Addressing these asymmetries requires institutional reforms that decentralize authority and provide women with direct channels to buyers and certification bodies.

Digital platforms offer reach but also introduce new dynamics: moralized content can amplify support but also polarize or attract misinformation-driven disputes (Bavel et al., 2023; Petratos & Faccia, 2023). Women coffeepreneurs need strategic digital literacy that goes beyond posting content to include reputational risk management and engagement with critical audiences.

Interventions should avoid technological determinism. While blockchain and traceability systems can shore up trustworthiness, their design and deployment must be participatory; otherwise, they risk creating new forms of exclusion. Capacity-building should therefore pair technological training with collective governance strategies that ensure shared benefits.

Policy recommendations must be context-specific. Blanket promotion of certifications or export-oriented marketing may undermine local livelihoods if they impose costs beyond smallholders' capacities. Instead, hybrid models that combine culturally resonant storytelling, cooperative-backed verification, and scalable technological tools offer a more equitable path.

## 5. Conclusion

Women coffee entrepreneurs in Toraja enact sustainability communication through culturally embedded storytelling, relational leadership, and pragmatic use of mixed media channels. Their narratives draw legitimacy from local moral idioms while seeking resonance with ethical consumers abroad.

Effectiveness lies in blending authenticity with credible evidence: narrative strategies must be complemented by accessible verification mechanisms—whether cooperative attestations, simple traceability records, or participatory audits—to satisfy diverse audiences.

Capacity-building that strengthens baseline communication skills (audience targeting, message design, multimodal content), addresses gendered learning barriers, and fosters interorganizational sensemaking can enhance both local resilience and market competitiveness (Shivni et al., 2021; Kuhlmann et al., 2023; Aday et al., 2025). Programs should be co-designed with women to ensure cultural fit and sustainability.

Technological innovations such as blockchain can augment trust when implemented inclusively, but they should not replace the relational work of community-based storytelling and cooperative governance (Nayal et al., 2021; Yavaprabhas et al., 2022; Petratos & Faccia, 2023). Interventions that integrate cultural narratives with appropriate verification technologies hold the most promise.

Finally, supporting women's communicative agency is not merely a marketing tactic; it is a pathway to socio-economic justice, environmental stewardship, and culturally rooted development. Policies, research, and practice must center women's voices as active co-producers of sustainable value chains rather than as passive bearers of traditional knowledge.

## 6. References

- Aday, A., Engstrom, H. R., & Schmader, T. (2025). Gender Essentialism Leads to Biased Learning Opportunities That Shape Women's Career Interests. *Psychological Science*. <https://doi.org/10.1177/09567976251353753>
- Bavel, J. V. V., Robertson, C. E., Rosario, K. D., Rasmussen, J., & Rathje, S. (2023). Social Media and Morality. *Annual Review of Psychology*. <https://doi.org/10.1146/annurev-psych-022123-110258>
- Bullough, A., Guelich, U., Manolova, T., & Schjoedt, L. (2021). Women's entrepreneurship and culture: gender role expectations and identities, societal culture, and the entrepreneurial environment. *Small Business Economics*, 58, 985-996. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s11187-020-00429-6>
- Eichenauer, C. J., Ryan, A., & Alanis, J. M. (2021). Leadership During Crisis: An Examination of Supervisory Leadership Behavior and Gender During COVID-19. *Journal of Leadership and Organizational Studies*, 29, 190-207. <https://doi.org/10.1177/15480518211010761>
- Kuhlmann, M., Meuer, J., & Bening, C. (2023). Interorganizational Sensemaking of the Transition Toward a Circular Value Chain. *Organization and Environment*, 36, 411-441. <https://doi.org/10.1177/10860266231162057>
- Nayal, K., Raut, R. D., Narkhede, B., Priyadarshinee, P., Panchal, G. B., & Gedam, V. (2021). Antecedents for blockchain technology-enabled sustainable agriculture supply chain. *Annals of Operations Research*, 1-45. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s10479-021-04423-3>
- Petratos, P., & Faccia, A. (2023). Fake news, misinformation, disinformation, and supply chain risks and disruptions: risk management and resilience using blockchain. *Annals of Operations Research*, 1-28. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s10479-023-05242-4>
- Scott-Phillips, T. (2025). Communication and grammar: A synthesis. *Psychological Review*. <https://doi.org/10.1037/rev0000542>
- Shivni, R., Cline, C., Newport, M., Yuan, S., & Bergan-Roller, H. E. (2021). Establishing a baseline of science communication skills in an undergraduate environmental science course. *International Journal of Stem Education*, 8. <https://doi.org/10.1186/s40594-021-00304-0>
- Yavaprabhas, K., Pournader, M., & Seuring, S. (2022). Blockchain is the "trust-building machine" for supply chain management. *Annals of Operations Research*, 1-40. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s10479-022-04868->