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Eco-credibility and green university branding in Saudi higher education: A critical multimodal study of Prince Sattam bin Abdulaziz university's online sustainability communication

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ABSTRACT

This article critically examines eco-credibility in Prince Sattam bin Abdulaziz University's online sustainability communication, with attention to green university branding in Saudi higher education. Using multimodal discourse analysis, the article studies how official PSAU pages and related institutional news construct sustainability through green-campus imagery, quantified environmental claims, national-policy alignment, digital transformation, research and innovation, SDG/ESG governance, and impact ranking narratives. The article argues that PSAU's green brand is most credible when it combines symbolic visibility with measurable evidence and accountable governance. It is less persuasive when environmental claims are dispersed, methodologically under-explained, or dependent on promotional language without clear baselines. The analysis identifies a credibility chain made of five links: claim, evidence, method, accountability, and dialogue. If any link is weak, audiences may interpret sustainability communication as reputation management rather than evidence-based institutional responsibility. The article proposes practical anti-greenwashing safeguards for Saudi universities, including methodological notes, open indicator dashboards, evidence taxonomies, stakeholder participation, annual progress archives, and clearer distinction between environmental performance, SDG recognition, digital capacity, and institutional reputation.

KEYWORDS: eco-credibility, green university branding, greenwashing, multimodal discourse analysis, Saudi higher education, SDG reporting, institutional reputation, PSAU

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1. Introduction

Green university branding has become a central feature of higher education communication. Universities use sustainability narratives to attract students, demonstrate social responsibility, strengthen international reputation, support ranking performance, build partnerships, and align with national development agendas. Yet green branding is ethically sensitive. A university is expected to be a place of knowledge, evidence, and critical inquiry. If its environmental claims are vague, exaggerated, selective, or difficult to verify, the risk to credibility can be greater than it would be for many other organizations. The public expects universities to model the intellectual standards they teach.

Prince Sattam bin Abdulaziz University is a useful case because its online communication displays many features of contemporary green branding. The university presents a Green University initiative with tree planting and green-space expansion, connects sustainability to Saudi Vision 2030 and the Saudi Green Initiative, highlights research and innovation in sustainability and energy, reports digital transformation achievements, establishes an SDG and ESG Strategy and Implementation Unit, and publicizes strong performance in THE Impact Rankings. These are meaningful elements of a green brand. The question is how they work together to produce eco-credibility.

Eco-credibility is not the same as environmental perfection. No large university is environmentally perfect. Campuses consume energy and water, generate waste, operate laboratories, move people, construct buildings, procure goods, and maintain digital infrastructure. Eco-credibility means that the university communicates honestly about its commitments, evidence, methods, progress, limitations, and responsibilities. A credible green university does not merely celebrate success. It shows how success is measured, what remains difficult, and how stakeholders can participate in improvement.

This article therefore adopts a critical multimodal perspective. It analyzes PSAU's online sustainability communication as a combination of text, numbers, visual identity, interface cues, national symbols, institutional labels, and evidence genres. The aim is not to dismiss green branding but to distinguish credible branding from potentially weak or vulnerable branding. In an era of increasing scrutiny of sustainability claims, such distinction is necessary for institutions that wish to build long-term trust.

The article contributes to debates on sustainability communication in three ways. First, it situates a Saudi university's green discourse within national environmental transformation, especially Vision 2030 and the Saudi Green Initiative. Second, it integrates multimodal discourse analysis with eco-credibility and greenwashing research. Third, it offers a practical credibility framework that can guide university communicators, sustainability officers, IT teams, researchers, and quality-assurance units.

2. Green Branding, Reputation, and Credibility in Universities

Branding is sometimes treated as superficial, but in higher education it has real institutional consequences. A university brand organizes expectations about academic quality, research capacity, social responsibility, student experience, and public value. Green branding adds another expectation: that the university is environmentally responsible and committed to sustainable development. For a Saudi public university, the green brand also signals contribution to national transformation and quality of life. It is therefore both reputational and civic.

The danger is that branding can outrun evidence. Environmental images are easy to produce: trees, leaves, green colors, solar panels, students outdoors, clean buildings, and national emblems. Environmental vocabulary is also easy to repeat: sustainable, green, responsible, eco-friendly, innovative, climate-conscious. Evidence is harder. It requires measurement, baselines, methods, accountability, and sometimes uncomfortable disclosures. Eco-credibility depends on whether the brand is disciplined by evidence.

Universities face a particular form of greenwashing risk because their sustainability activities are broad and uneven. A university may excel in sustainability education but have weak operational reporting. It may plant trees but lack transparent waste data. It may perform well in SDG rankings but not yet publish greenhouse gas inventories. It may have active student campaigns but fragmented governance. A credible brand must avoid allowing strength in one area to imply comprehensive excellence in all areas. Precision is therefore an ethical communication practice.

Multimodal analysis helps because green branding is rarely only textual. It is built through page names, layout hierarchy, images, colors, icons, hyperlinks, ranking badges, downloadable reports, videos,

maps, dashboards, and social-media circulation. In PSAU's case, green branding appears across official website pages, a news portal, subdomains, IT pages, and ranking-related material. The brand is distributed rather than centralized. This distribution can demonstrate institutional breadth, but it can also make the evidence chain harder to follow.

3. National Context: Saudi Sustainability and Higher Education

Saudi Arabia's national sustainability context gives university green branding a distinctive meaning. Vision 2030 frames transformation through economic diversification, quality of life, government efficiency, innovation, and social development. The Saudi Green Initiative organizes national climate action around emissions reduction, afforestation and land regeneration, and land and sea protection. The SDGs provide a global development vocabulary that connects education, health, gender equality, innovation, climate, responsible consumption, and partnerships. Saudi universities operate within all three frames.

PSAU's online communication uses these frames explicitly. The Green University page links afforestation to the Saudi Green Initiative. The Vision 2030 Initiatives page connects sustainability education, curricula, workshops, renewable energy, resource efficiency, environmental research, digital transformation, data management, and a Green Technology Initiative. The SDG and ESG Strategy and Implementation Unit page connects sustainability governance to Saudi Vision 2030, the PSAU 2030 SDG Roadmap, global frameworks, ESG reporting, and benchmarking systems. These links make the university's green brand legible within national and international agendas.

This alignment is a credibility strength because it situates PSAU within recognized policy ecosystems. It also creates a responsibility to communicate progress with clarity. When a university claims alignment with national and global agendas, stakeholders may ask how its activities map onto specific targets, indicators, timelines, and outcomes. The stronger the alignment claim, the stronger the need for transparent reporting. National context amplifies credibility only when it is accompanied by local evidence.

Higher education adds another layer because universities are expected to generate the knowledge needed for sustainability transitions. PSAU's research and innovation messaging identifies support for national priorities including sustainability, energy, industry, and future economies. The SDG research funding program further links technology and research to SDG challenges. A credible green brand should therefore show not only operational greening but also intellectual contribution: research outputs, patents, community projects, student learning, and interdisciplinary collaboration.

4. Method and Analytic Framework

The study uses critical multimodal discourse analysis of official public PSAU digital materials. The corpus includes pages on the Green University initiative, Vision 2030 initiatives, research and innovation, strategic plan, vision and mission, IT governance and compliance, SDG and ESG strategy, digital performance news, and THE Impact Rankings news. These texts were selected because they contain the main digital elements through which PSAU's green brand is constructed: environmental metrics, digital-transformation evidence, innovation claims, governance statements, national alignment, and external recognition.

The analysis uses a five-link credibility chain: claim, evidence, method, accountability, and dialogue. Claim refers to what the university says it is doing or achieving. Evidence refers to the data, examples, images, rankings, or institutional structures used to support the claim. Method refers to how evidence is produced or calculated. Accountability refers to who is responsible for implementation, monitoring, and reporting. Dialogue refers to whether stakeholders can ask questions, participate, or provide feedback. A green brand becomes stronger when all five links are visible.

The article also distinguishes between four types of sustainability evidence. Operational evidence concerns campus practices such as trees, green spaces, energy savings, buildings, waste, water, and emissions. Educational evidence concerns curricula, workshops, courses, student projects, and open learning resources. Research evidence concerns grants, publications, technology transfer, innovation centers, patents, and applied projects. Reputational evidence concerns rankings, awards, partnerships, and media coverage. Each evidence type is valuable, but none should be allowed to stand in for all the others.

Table 1. Eco-credibility chain for green university communication

Credibility link	Strong sign	Weak sign to avoid
Claim	Specific statement tied to an activity or outcome	General green adjective without clear referent
Evidence	Numbers, dates, sources, images, documents, or third-party recognition	Uncontextualized slogans or isolated success stories
Method	Calculation notes, baselines, indicator definitions, update cycle	Metrics without explanation
Accountability	Named unit, governance structure, responsible office, reporting duty	Anonymous responsibility or unclear ownership
Dialogue	Feedback forms, participation links, student and community voice	One-way announcement with no response channel

This framework is evaluative but not punitive. Its purpose is to help distinguish between credible communication and communication that may be vulnerable to skepticism. A message can be accurate and still be weak if the evidence chain is hard to follow. A message can be promotional and still be credible if it is specific, measured, governed, and open to scrutiny. The framework therefore supports improvement rather than accusation.

5. Analysis: PSAU Green Branding in Digital Form

5.1 Claim: the university as green, innovative, and nationally aligned

The core brand claim is that PSAU is a university contributing to sustainable development through environmental action, innovation, education, digital transformation, and social responsibility. This claim appears across multiple pages rather than in a single slogan. The vision and mission emphasize knowledge economy, innovative research, partnerships, social responsibility, technological resources, and a stimulating academic environment. The strategic plan emphasizes research, community service, digital transformation, reputation, student empowerment, financial sustainability, and community responsibility. The Green University initiative supplies the explicit environmental label. Together these materials present sustainability as part of institutional identity. The claim is also nationally aligned. PSAU's sustainability discourse repeatedly invokes Vision 2030 and the Saudi Green Initiative. This makes the brand more than local. The university is not merely greening its campus; it is presented as contributing to national environmental and development goals. The discourse of alignment is powerful because it places PSAU within a collective transformation story. It also helps explain why a university should care about afforestation, digital services, SDG research, and global rankings: these are not isolated activities, but contributions to the future economy and quality of life.

A potential weakness of the claim stage is breadth. The broader a green brand becomes, the harder it is to substantiate. If sustainability includes campus landscaping, digital education, research, governance, social responsibility, rankings, partnerships, and national identity, audiences need a map of the relationships among these elements. Otherwise, the brand risks becoming an umbrella term that covers many positive activities without showing how they produce environmental outcomes. A central communication architecture would help convert breadth into coherence.

5.2 Evidence: numbers, rankings, and institutional structures

PSAU's online communication contains several strong evidence devices. The Green University page gives material indicators such as seedlings, tree counts, green-space area, species, estimated oxygen production, carbon dioxide absorption, temperature reduction, and expansion to 112,000 square meters with 1,085 new trees in 2026. Digital performance news reports an 82.85 percent digital transformation rate, more than 4,500 e-courses, 2,200 flexible learning paths, and approximately 1,880 open educational resources. Another performance report mentions energy-consumption rationalization savings of 32.6 percent and a Green University initiative to expand cultivated areas. Ranking news reports advancement in THE Impact Rankings.

These evidence devices work because they interrupt vague branding. A claim about green space becomes more credible when it includes square meters. A claim about digital learning becomes more credible when it includes course and resource counts. A claim about SDG performance becomes more credible when a third-

party ranking is mentioned. A claim about sustainability governance becomes more credible when a unit is named and its responsibilities are described. Numbers and structures are therefore semiotic resources: they make the brand appear measurable and managed.

However, evidence must be categorized. A digital transformation rate does not directly prove environmental performance. It proves progress in digital maturity according to a specific index. E-courses and open educational resources do not automatically reduce emissions unless connected to paper reduction, travel reduction, or sustainability learning. Rankings do not replace environmental inventories. Tree counts do not address energy, water, waste, procurement, or transport. PSAU's evidence is valuable, but the communication should help audiences understand what each evidence type demonstrates and what it does not demonstrate.
The SDG and ESG Strategy and Implementation Unit is a particularly important evidence device because it is both evidence and accountability. It shows that sustainability has an organizational home. Its described responsibilities include coordination, governance, monitoring, reporting, curriculum integration, research support, partnerships, transparency, and policy alignment. This gives the green brand institutional seriousness. It also creates expectations for regular publications, dashboards, evidence repositories, and cross-unit coordination.

5.3 Method: the missing middle of many sustainability claims

The method link is where many institutional sustainability messages become vulnerable. PSAU's pages include useful numbers, but some numbers require explanation to be fully credible. For example, estimates of oxygen production or carbon dioxide absorption depend on tree species, tree age, health, climate, calculation model, and maintenance. Temperature reduction depends on measurement location, time of day, season, baseline, and comparison area. Energy savings depend on baseline year, facility scope, weather adjustment, and operational changes. Without method notes, readers may accept the claim rhetorically but remain unable to verify it analytically.

A university has an advantage here because it can turn method into education. Instead of hiding technical complexity, PSAU could publish short 'how we measured this' explanations written by faculty, facilities staff, or students. A carbon absorption note could become a learning resource in environmental science. A green-space map could become a GIS exercise. An energy-savings dashboard could support engineering projects. A digital-transformation indicator could be explained by IT governance staff. Method transparency would strengthen credibility and support teaching.

Method disclosure also protects the university from accidental overclaiming. Environmental calculations are often revised as better data become available. If the method is visible, revisions can be understood as improvement rather than inconsistency. If only the final number is visible, later changes may look like contradiction. Eco-credible branding therefore treats method as part of the brand. It says: we are not only committed to sustainability; we are committed to showing how we know what we claim.

5.4 Accountability: governance as anti-greenwashing infrastructure

Accountability is one of PSAU's strengths. The SDG and ESG Strategy and Implementation Unit provides a central structure for sustainability governance. The IT Governance and Compliance Unit provides a parallel structure for digital governance, technology-risk management, compliance, and service reliability. The strategic plan identifies priorities such as community responsibility, financial sustainability, quality practices, and digital transformation. These structures give communicators something more credible than campaign language: they show that sustainability and digital maturity have institutional owners.

Accountability also appears through external frames. THE Impact Rankings and SDG benchmarking expose universities to comparison. Global reporting frameworks such as GRI emphasize impacts on economy, environment, and people in ways that are comparable and transparent. PSAU's communication could benefit from referencing such frameworks when reporting environmental indicators. Even if the university does not produce a full GRI report, the logic of material topics, impacts, methods, and management approaches can guide credibility.

The challenge is to make accountability visible to ordinary users. Governance pages can be dense and may not be visited by students or community members. A green brand should translate governance into plain-language accountability: who coordinates sustainability, what data are collected, how often progress is

reported, how students can participate, and whom to contact with questions. Accountability that is hidden in organizational language is weaker than accountability made accessible.

5.5 Dialogue: from institutional monologue to shared responsibility

Dialogue is the least developed link in many university sustainability communications, and PSAU's digital material shows room for growth here. The official website contains features that could support dialogue, including share functions, contact links, chatbot imagery, app links, and e-participation references. Yet sustainability pages themselves would be stronger if they directly invited stakeholder questions, suggestions, project submissions, volunteer registration, and feedback on indicators. A green brand becomes more credible when audiences are allowed to participate in its verification and development.

Student voice is especially important. Students are not only recipients of sustainability messages; they are co-producers of campus culture. Their projects, competitions, volunteering, research posters, recycling habits, energy-conservation practices, and critiques can make sustainability communication more authentic. PSAU's discourse already mentions student programs, workshops, and practical projects. The next step would be to make student participation more visible through digital galleries, short videos, project maps, and reflective narratives.

Community dialogue also matters because PSAU's Green University initiative refers to Al-Kharj cities, centers, and villages, quality of life, and green-space sustainability beyond campus. If the university positions itself as contributing to local environmental improvement, local stakeholders should be able to see benefits, partnerships, and participation routes. Community-facing sustainability communication could include partner stories, school outreach, planting events, public lectures, and citizen-science initiatives.

6. Greenwashing Risks and How PSAU Can Avoid Them

The first greenwashing risk is vagueness. Phrases such as sustainable, green, innovative, and responsible are useful but insufficient. PSAU can avoid vagueness by pairing each broad claim with a specific example, indicator, or responsible unit. For instance, 'green campus' can be linked to tree counts, green-space area, irrigation practices, biodiversity plans, and maintenance responsibilities. 'Green technology' can be linked to smart systems, data dashboards, energy monitoring, virtual labs, or paperless services. Specificity disciplines the brand.

The second risk is selective visibility. Tree planting is attractive and easily photographed, but stakeholders may also expect information on energy use, water use, waste, transport, construction, procurement, and emissions. PSAU's existing mention of energy rationalization is useful, but it should be integrated with other operational indicators. A balanced green brand should not hide difficult areas. It should show a roadmap: what is measured now, what will be measured next, what targets exist, and where improvement is needed.

The third risk is evidence substitution. A high SDG ranking is impressive, but it should not substitute for environmental reporting. Digital transformation is valuable, but it should not substitute for sustainability outcomes. Research activity is important, but it should not substitute for operational performance. PSAU can avoid evidence substitution by using an evidence taxonomy that labels each indicator as operational, educational, research, governance, community, digital, or reputational. This would help audiences interpret achievements accurately.

The fourth risk is methodological opacity. Numbers without methods may be perceived as promotional even when they are accurate. The solution is not to remove numbers but to support them. PSAU could publish short method notes, annual data tables, downloadable spreadsheets, and named contacts for indicator questions. It could also involve students and faculty in data validation as part of learning and research. Methodological openness is an anti-greenwashing safeguard.

The fifth risk is one-way communication. If sustainability pages only announce achievements, critical audiences may see them as reputation management. PSAU can counter this by inviting feedback, acknowledging challenges, publishing future targets, reporting progress over time, and showing how stakeholder input changes practice. Dialogue does not weaken a brand. It demonstrates confidence and accountability.

7. Toward an Eco-Credible Green University Brand

An eco-credible green university brand should be built on a simple principle: every claim should have a pathway

to evidence, and every evidence item should have a pathway to method, accountability, and dialogue. PSAU has many ingredients for such a brand. It has a visible Green University initiative, quantified campus greening, national alignment, SDG/ESG governance, digital transformation, research and innovation structures, IT governance, and impact ranking recognition. The opportunity is to organize these ingredients into a transparent evidence architecture.

The first practical step is a public sustainability dashboard. The dashboard could include green-space area, tree survival rate, irrigation practices, energy consumption, water use, waste diversion, digital service indicators, sustainability courses, SDG research projects, community initiatives, volunteer participation, and ranking evidence. Each indicator should include baseline, current value, target, update date, responsible unit, and method note. A dashboard of this kind would transform the green brand from a collection of pages into an accountability platform.

The second step is a multimodal evidence library. This library could include photographs, maps, videos, infographics, student project posters, research summaries, workshop materials, and downloadable reports. Each item should include alt text, date, location, SDG connection, and source. The purpose is not only publicity but verifiability. Users should be able to see what happened, where it happened, who was involved, and how it relates to the university's sustainability goals.

The third step is a narrative of honest progress. Eco-credible brands acknowledge that sustainability is ongoing. PSAU can celebrate its achievements while also identifying future work: more complete environmental indicators, stronger data integration, expanded student participation, more precise carbon accounting, and deeper links between digital transformation and environmental efficiency. Such honesty would be consistent with the university's values of transparency and accountability.

The fourth step is comparative clarity. When using rankings, PSAU should explain what the ranking measures and which SDGs are strongest. When using GRI or SDG language, it should explain which indicators are institutional and which are aspirational. When reporting digital transformation, it should explain environmental relevance. Comparative clarity protects the brand from misinterpretation and helps stakeholders evaluate progress fairly.

8. Implications for Saudi Higher Education

The PSAU case has implications beyond one university. Saudi higher education institutions are increasingly expected to align with national transformation, contribute to sustainability, improve digital services, engage communities, and compete internationally. Their communication strategies must therefore integrate environmental evidence, digital innovation, and stakeholder trust. A green brand that consists only of slogans and images will not be sufficient in this environment.

Saudi universities also have an opportunity to develop regionally relevant sustainability communication. Environmental conditions such as aridity, heat, water scarcity, dust, urban expansion, and land restoration require communication frameworks that differ from those used in wetter or colder regions. Afforestation and green-space cooling, for example, should be communicated with attention to irrigation, species selection, survivability, and local ecological fit. A Saudi green university brand should be both nationally aligned and environmentally specific.

Digital transformation can make Saudi universities leaders in evidence-based sustainability communication. Government digital standards, secure web platforms, bilingual communication, mobile services, learning technologies, data management, and AI initiatives can support transparent reporting and broad engagement. The key is to ensure that digital maturity is connected to sustainability outcomes rather than treated as a separate achievement. Data systems should serve environmental accountability.

Finally, universities can model critical environmental literacy. By explaining how sustainability claims are measured, where uncertainty exists, and how stakeholders can participate, universities teach the public how to evaluate green claims. This educational role is an ethical advantage. A credible university does not simply ask audiences to trust it; it teaches audiences how trust should be earned.

9. Conclusion

PSAU's online sustainability communication constructs a green university brand through the convergence of campus greening, national alignment, digital transformation, research and innovation, SDG/ESG governance, and ranking recognition. The brand has significant credibility strengths, especially its quantified Green University claims, its institutionalization of SDG and ESG coordination, its digital-governance language, and its external recognition in impact rankings. These elements show that sustainability is represented as a strategic, technological, educational, and civic commitment.

The critical issue is not whether PSAU should use green branding. It should, because universities need to communicate public value. The issue is how to ensure that the brand remains evidence-based and open to scrutiny. The article has proposed a five-link credibility chain: claim, evidence, method, accountability, and dialogue. Applying this chain would help PSAU and comparable Saudi universities avoid greenwashing risks, strengthen public trust, and transform sustainability communication into a form of environmental education. Eco-credibility is ultimately a practice of disciplined transparency: say what is being done, show the evidence, explain the method, name the responsible actors, and invite stakeholders into the work of improvement.

10. Extended Critical Reflections

A credibility-centered green brand should also avoid visual overdependence. Images of trees, campuses, and smiling students are valuable, but they can become substitutes for analysis if not paired with evidence. PSAU's communication can use visuals more powerfully by connecting each image to data: location, date, species, project phase, maintenance plan, student involvement, or measured benefit. In this way, the image becomes documentary evidence rather than decorative proof.

The relationship between ambition and evidence is another delicate issue. Visionary language is necessary because sustainability requires long-term imagination. Yet ambition should be marked as ambition and achievement as achievement. PSAU can make this distinction by separating targets, completed actions, ongoing projects, and future plans. This simple taxonomy would reduce ambiguity and show mature governance. It would also help ranking audiences, students, and partners understand where the university is in its sustainability journey.

Eco-credibility further requires attention to digital sustainability itself. Digital transformation has environmental costs as well as benefits: devices, servers, energy consumption, e-waste, and procurement. PSAU's green brand could become more sophisticated by acknowledging this duality and explaining how IT governance manages digital sustainability. Such honesty would prevent digital transformation from being automatically equated with environmental benefit and would position the university as a critical, evidence-based innovator.

Finally, green branding should remain connected to academic freedom and critical inquiry. Students and faculty should be able to study, question, and improve the university's sustainability practices. A university that opens its environmental data to student projects and research seminars turns branding into scholarship. PSAU's research and innovation ecosystem could make the campus a living laboratory where claims are tested, refined, and translated into better practice. This is the strongest form of eco-credibility because it makes the institution accountable to its own knowledge community.

10. Additional Critical Dimensions for Eco-Credible Branding

Regional ecology should shape green branding. In arid environments, tree planting and green-space expansion must be communicated with attention to water efficiency, species suitability, soil conditions, heat tolerance, and maintenance. A green campus message is more credible when it explains why particular species were selected and how irrigation is managed responsibly. PSAU's mention of palms, royal poinciana, Neem, and Ficus trees could become a richer ecological narrative if connected to local environmental reasoning.

Carbon language requires special care. Claims about carbon dioxide absorption are attractive because they connect trees to climate action, but they are also technically sensitive. A credible university should disclose assumptions and avoid implying that afforestation alone solves emissions. Trees can contribute to carbon sequestration and local cooling, but comprehensive climate responsibility also involves energy, transport, buildings, procurement, and behavior. PSAU can strengthen its brand by presenting afforestation as one component of a broader climate strategy.

Water should be visible in green campus branding. In Saudi Arabia, vegetation and water use are closely linked in public perception. Stakeholders may ask whether green spaces are irrigated efficiently, whether treated water is used, whether smart irrigation is applied, and how maintenance is adapted to climate. Including water indicators would make the Green University narrative more regionally credible. It would also show that the university understands the tradeoffs of environmental improvement in arid conditions.

Operational breadth is essential. A campus can look green while still having high energy use or waste generation. PSAU's communication would be stronger if green-space claims were placed alongside energy, water, waste, procurement, transport, and building indicators. This does not mean all indicators must be perfect before communication occurs. It means the university should show a roadmap toward comprehensive reporting. Honest breadth protects against the perception that the most photogenic indicator is carrying the whole brand. Ranking communication should avoid overextension. Impact rankings recognize important contributions to SDGs, but they are not the same as third-party environmental audits. PSAU can celebrate ranking progress while explaining which SDGs were strongest and what kinds of evidence supported them. This would help audiences appreciate the achievement accurately. It would also prevent ranking language from being interpreted as a blanket proof of all sustainability dimensions.

Visual rhetoric should be tied to documentary practice. If a page uses images of campus greenery, it can include captions with location, project phase, date, species, and responsible unit. If it uses student images, it can identify the educational activity or project. If it uses icons for SDGs or national programs, it can link to relevant targets. These small practices make visuals part of evidence rather than merely atmosphere.

Digital sustainability should be acknowledged as both opportunity and responsibility. E-learning, virtual labs, data systems, and digital services can reduce some resource use, but digital infrastructures also consume energy and create device lifecycles. PSAU's IT governance discourse can be extended to include green IT principles such as efficient procurement, device management, cloud energy considerations, e-waste practices, and responsible data storage. This would make the green technology message more sophisticated.

Procurement is a hidden but important brand dimension. Universities purchase paper, equipment, laboratory materials, furniture, food, vehicles, and construction services. Green branding becomes more credible when procurement policies support sustainability. PSAU could gradually communicate responsible procurement criteria, supplier expectations, and examples of sustainable purchasing. This would move the brand beyond visible campus landscaping into the everyday economics of institutional life.

Pedagogy can protect against greenwashing. When students are invited to analyze the university's own sustainability claims, they learn critical environmental literacy. PSAU could assign classes to evaluate indicator methods, design better infographics, map green spaces, analyze energy data, or propose behavior-change campaigns. This would make the campus a living text and would show confidence in student critique. A university that allows its claims to be studied demonstrates academic integrity.

External assurance may become increasingly important. As sustainability reporting expectations rise, universities may benefit from independent review of selected indicators or processes. Assurance does not need to begin with a comprehensive audit; it could start with specific metrics such as energy savings, green-space area, or SDG reporting processes. Third-party review would add a strong link to the credibility chain and would prepare the university for future reporting standards.

Open data is another credibility asset. Even simple downloadable spreadsheets can strengthen trust if they include dates, units, definitions, and responsible offices. PSAU's digital transformation and data management initiatives create favorable conditions for open sustainability data. Open data can also support student research, faculty analysis, community transparency, and ranking submissions. The key is to publish data in forms that are understandable and responsibly governed.

Crisis and correction communication should be planned. If an environmental indicator is later found to be inaccurate or a project faces delays, the university should have a process for updating the public record. Corrections are not failures when they are handled transparently. They show that the institution values accuracy over image. A credibility chain that includes method and accountability makes corrections easier because the source of change can be explained.

A maturity model would help organize progress. PSAU could classify sustainability communication into stages: basic visibility, quantified indicators, methodological notes, integrated dashboard, stakeholder dialogue,

and external assurance. This model would allow the university to show where it currently stands and what improvements are planned. It would also provide a roadmap for colleges and units that contribute evidence.
The most important implication is cultural. Eco-credible branding is not produced only by communication staff. It depends on researchers, IT teams, facilities staff, students, administrators, quality units, and leadership sharing a culture of evidence. PSAU's existing governance structures make such a culture possible. The communication challenge is to make that culture visible to stakeholders in ways that are clear, accessible, and open to questioning.

11. A Practical Anti-Greenwashing Checklist

The first checklist question is: What exactly is being claimed? A page should state whether it is reporting a completed activity, an ongoing initiative, a future target, a ranking result, or a general commitment. This distinction prevents ambition from being confused with achievement. PSAU's green communication can make this distinction through labels such as completed, in progress, planned, measured, and externally recognized.

The second question is: What evidence supports the claim? Evidence may include figures, photographs, maps, documents, rankings, policy decisions, or responsible units. The platform should place evidence close to the claim or provide a clear link. Users should not have to search across multiple pages to understand why a statement is credible. Proximity between claim and evidence is a basic design principle for trust.

The third question is: How was the evidence produced? A method note can be short, but it should identify the source, calculation, baseline, period, and update cycle when relevant. For complex environmental claims, the note can link to a longer technical document. This practice is especially important for carbon, energy, water, and temperature claims because audiences may interpret them as scientific indicators.

The fourth question is: Who is responsible? Every major sustainability indicator should identify the responsible unit or office. PSAU's SDG and ESG Strategy and Implementation Unit can coordinate, but many indicators will belong to facilities, IT, colleges, research centers, or student affairs. Responsibility mapping prevents claims from becoming anonymous and helps users know where to direct questions.

The fifth question is: What is the time frame? Sustainability communication often weakens when it reports achievements without dates. A tree count, green-space area, energy saving, or course number should indicate the year or reporting period. Time frames allow comparison and prevent old achievements from being mistaken for current progress. They also support annual reporting.

The sixth question is: What is not covered? Credible communication acknowledges scope. If a page reports green-space expansion, it can state whether water use, biodiversity, or maintenance will be reported elsewhere. If a ranking announcement highlights SDG performance, it can clarify that operational environmental indicators are reported separately. Scope notes protect against overinterpretation.

The seventh question is: How can stakeholders respond? A page can include a contact, feedback form, participation link, or invitation to propose projects. Dialogue transforms sustainability from brand display into shared governance. It also helps the university detect errors, collect ideas, and identify stakeholder priorities.

The eighth question is: Is the visual evidence documented? Photographs should have captions, locations, dates, and alt text. Infographics should cite data sources. Maps should include legends and update dates. Visual communication is powerful, and therefore it should be accountable. Good documentation makes visuals more trustworthy and more accessible.

The ninth question is: Does the claim match the evidence type? A ranking result should support a claim about recognition, not a claim about direct environmental impact unless the ranking indicator specifically measures it. A digital transformation rate should support a claim about digital maturity, not automatic environmental performance. Matching evidence to claim is one of the most effective anti-greenwashing safeguards.

The tenth question is: Can the claim be updated? Sustainability communication should be designed for revision. Pages should include last-updated dates, version history for reports, and archived annual data. This allows the university to correct, improve, and compare. A static claim may look impressive initially, but a living claim builds long-term credibility.

These checklist questions can be embedded into PSAU's content workflow. Before publishing a sustainability page or news item, communicators could verify claim type, evidence, method, responsibility, time frame, scope, response route, visual documentation, evidence match, and update plan. This would operationalize eco-credibility as a routine editorial practice rather than an abstract ideal.

The broader lesson is that green branding becomes defensible when it is governed like academic work. Claims need support. Evidence needs method. Methods need transparency. Interpretations need proportion. Audiences need access. If PSAU applies these principles consistently, its green university brand can move beyond promotional identity and become a model of evidence-based sustainability communication in Saudi higher education.

12. From Brand Promise to Institutional Learning

The green brand should be understood as a promise that generates obligations. When PSAU presents itself as a green, innovative, and socially responsible university, it invites stakeholders to expect continuous learning. The brand promise therefore requires regular evidence, not occasional celebration. It should be renewed through annual reporting, student participation, research translation, and operational improvement.

Institutional learning is visible when indicators change practice. If data reveal that a green space requires more water than expected, the university can adjust species selection or irrigation technology. If feedback shows that students do not understand recycling procedures, communication can be redesigned. If rankings reveal strengths in some SDGs and weaknesses in others, strategy can be refined. Eco-credibility grows when data are used, not merely displayed.

A learning-oriented brand also welcomes comparison. PSAU can compare its indicators with national goals, previous university performance, peer institutions, and global frameworks where appropriate. Comparison should be fair and contextual, especially because universities differ in climate, size, mission, and resources. Nevertheless, comparison helps audiences see direction and scale. It turns sustainability from a claim of virtue into a question of progress.

The communication culture needed for such learning is collaborative. Communicators need data from facilities, IT, colleges, student affairs, research centers, and governance units. Data owners need communication guidance so that figures are not misused. Researchers can help with methods. Students can help with interpretation and participation. Leadership can connect the effort to strategy. The green brand becomes credible when these actors work as a system.

For Saudi higher education, this approach can produce a distinctive model: nationally aligned, locally grounded, digitally enabled, evidence-based, and pedagogically open. PSAU's online sustainability communication already points toward this model. The task is to make the credibility chain visible enough that stakeholders can follow it, question it, and contribute to it.

This model also supports reputation ethically. A university does not need to choose between promotion and transparency. It can promote achievements while showing evidence and limits. Indeed, transparency can itself become part of the reputation. For PSAU, the most durable green brand will be one that audiences can inspect, learn from, and help improve.

The same lesson applies to all Saudi universities seeking stronger sustainability reputations. The institutions that lead will not be those that use the greenest vocabulary, but those that make their claims easiest to verify and their stakeholders easiest to involve. PSAU's case shows how a university can move toward that standard by linking campus action, digital governance, research, national strategy, and transparent communication.

Eco-credibility should therefore be understood as a long-term relationship with audiences. Each accurate update adds trust; each unexplained claim consumes trust. A disciplined communication system protects that relationship by ensuring that green branding remains anchored in evidence, method, accountability, and dialogue.

13. Future Research Directions

Future research on PSAU's eco-credibility could combine discourse analysis with environmental reporting analysis. Researchers could compare public claims with available operational data on energy, water, waste, green space, transport, and procurement. This would not only evaluate communication accuracy but also identify which indicators are most ready for public dashboard reporting. The result would be a bridge between media analysis and sustainability management.

A second direction is comparative analysis across Saudi universities. Different institutions may use different green branding strategies depending on geography, mission, size, age, and ranking priorities. Comparing PSAU with other Saudi universities would show whether national alignment, afforestation, SDG rankings, digital

transformation, and research innovation are common patterns or distinctive features. Such comparison would help identify best practices for the Saudi higher education sector.

A third direction is audience trust research. Students and faculty could be asked which evidence types make green claims credible: numbers, images, rankings, reports, named units, student stories, third-party verification, or open data. Their responses would help communicators prioritize formats. A critical audience may value method notes, while a general audience may first need clear stories and visual maps. Effective communication requires both.

The final direction is pedagogical experimentation. Courses could ask students to redesign a sustainability page using the credibility chain proposed in this article. Students would practice evidence selection, plain-language explanation, visual documentation, and ethical persuasion. The classroom would then become a site where green branding is not merely consumed but improved. This would be a fitting role for a university committed to knowledge, innovation, and social responsibility.

14. Policy and Ethical Implications

For Saudi higher education policy, the eco-credibility framework suggests that sustainability communication should be supported by common expectations. Universities could be encouraged to publish indicators with dates, methods, responsible units, and SDG mappings. Such expectations would not force all institutions to look the same, but they would make green claims more comparable and reduce the risk of symbolic communication. National transformation benefits when public institutions communicate progress in verifiable ways.

For PSAU leadership, the ethical implication is that credibility is a strategic asset. A transparent green brand can strengthen reputation more durably than a purely promotional one because it can withstand scrutiny. Students, faculty, partners, and ranking bodies increasingly expect evidence. When evidence is easy to find and methods are clear, the institution appears confident and mature. Transparency is therefore not only an ethical duty but a competitive advantage.

For communicators, the framework changes the writing process. A sustainability news item should not begin only with a positive headline. It should begin with evidence questions: What happened? When? Where? Who participated? What changed? How was it measured? Which SDGs or national goals are relevant? Who is responsible for follow-up? These questions produce stronger stories because they connect human interest with accountability.

For students and faculty, eco-credible communication creates opportunities for critical participation. They can help gather data, interpret indicators, design visuals, test messages, and propose improvements. This transforms green branding from a top-down image into a shared academic project. A university's strongest sustainability brand is one that its knowledge community can examine and improve without fear.

For the public, the ethical benefit is clearer understanding. Communities are often exposed to many environmental claims from institutions, companies, and government bodies. When a university models careful claim-making, it contributes to wider environmental literacy. PSAU can therefore use its digital sustainability communication not only to present itself well but to raise the standard of green communication around it.

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