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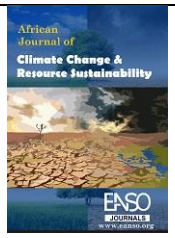

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Original Article

Performing Sustainability: The Power of Theatre in Environmental Communication

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ABSTRACT

This article interrogates the intersections of performance theory and sustainability communication by foregrounding theatre as a critical modality for re-imagining ecological futures. While dominant environmental discourses frequently privilege technocratic or informational paradigms, this study argues that theatre mobilises affect, embodiment, and collective spectatorship to destabilise anthropocentric narratives and cultivate ecological consciousness. Grounded in performance theory, ecocriticism, and sustainability studies, the paper conceptualises theatre as both an epistemic practice and an experience that disrupts linear models of knowledge transfer. Instead, it provides dialogic spaces where audiences encounter environmental crises as lived, affective, and relational phenomena. Drawing on theoretical frameworks such as performativity, liminality, and eco-aesthetics, the paper situates theatre as a transformative communicative practice that reconfigures human–nature relations and expands the discursive repertoire of environmental sustainability. Rather than functioning as a supplementary cultural form, theatre emerges here as a generative site of environmental meaning-making, capable of reshaping imaginaries, contesting hegemonic narratives of development, and advancing sustainability transitions. The argument contributes to ongoing debates in performance, environmental sciences, development, and sustainability by demonstrating how theatrical praxis extends beyond representation to enact ecological agency and social transformation.

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INTRODUCTION

Environmental sustainability continues to be one of the defining challenges of the twenty-first century, shaping discourses across academic, policy, and civic spheres (Tancredi, 2023, Vasconcelos, 2022, Little, Hester, & Carey, 2016; Thangavel & Sridevi, 2016, Stocker, 2014, WHO, 2014, Leemans, & Solecki, 2013; Schneider, 2011, Goodland, 1995). The UN has put it at the forefront by setting up Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) and the corresponding Sustainable Development Global Indicator Framework, and continues urging individual states and governments to improve their action on environmental sustainability by setting desirable targets (United Nations, 2015). Of the 17 SDGs, 7 (6, 7, 9, 11, 12, 13, 14, & 15) are about a sustainable environment. In Uganda, these have been re-emphasised in Vision 2040 (NPA 2007), and also captured in the different five-year National Development Plans (NDPs) (NPA, 2015, 2020, 2025), and the NRM manifestos (Museveni, 2016, & 2021).

Morelli (2011) defines environmental sustainability as the capacity of societies to meet the resource and service needs of present generations without compromising the ecological integrity that will serve future generations, and Thangavel and Sridevi (2016) look at it as a paradigm for the future. These definitions foreground the paradox at the heart of sustainability: the need to balance immediate demands with long-term ecological resilience. Despite the proliferation of sustainability frameworks and global commitments, environmental sustainability remains more aspirational than actualised. The persistent gap between environmental knowledge and behaviour underscores the limitations of conventional communication strategies. Awareness campaigns, digital platforms, seminars, and technical dissemination strategies have undoubtedly expanded environmental discourse, yet their effectiveness in shaping practice remains uneven.

Scholars of sustainability communication (Cox, 2013; Schäfer & O'Neill, 2017; Moser, 2016; Bessette, 2004) argue that cognitive awareness alone rarely precipitates behavioural transformation. Instead, effective communication must also engage affective, experiential, and dialogical dimensions, which are usually missing from the traditional top-down or information-deficient models. This recognition has pushed scholars and practitioners to search for communication methods that are not only informative but also participatory, immersive, and transformative (Kiefer & Trumpp, 2012; Klein & Baxter, Villatte, Levin, & Hildebrandt, 2011; 2006; Hayes Schmidt, 2005).

Performance theory offers a powerful conceptual framework for rethinking sustainability communication. Building on the work of Turner (1982), Schechner (2006), Carlson (2004), and Smith (2024), performance is understood not simply as entertainment but as an embodied mode of social action, ritual, meaning-making, and building of partnerships. Fischer-Lichte (2008) emphasises performance as a transformative aesthetic event, wherein audiences are not passive recipients but co-creators of meaning through embodied presence and affective investment. In this sense, performance operates as both representation and enactment, enabling abstract ideas to be rendered tangible through lived experience.

When applied to environmental communication, performance theory shifts the analytical lens from the transmission of information to the enactment of ecological consciousness. Theatre does not merely tell audiences about sustainability; it stages it, animates it, and invites collective reflection

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upon it. The stage becomes a liminal space (Turner, 1982) where audiences can experiment with alternative ways of knowing, feeling, and relating to the environment. Such a perspective resonates with what Cox (2013) describes as the "constitutive dimension" of environmental communication, the capacity of communication to shape not only perceptions but the very conditions of collective engagement with environmental issues.

Theatre, as a performative form, has a long history of addressing social and political concerns Glass, M. R., & Rose-Redwood, 2014; Reinelt, 2002; Kershaw, 1992). In Africa, for instance, community-based and popular theatre have been mobilised to confront issues ranging from public health (Mda, 1993; Ngugi, 1986) to political oppression (Kerr, 1995) to community mobilisation (Burnham, 2006). Globally, applied theatre traditions have demonstrated efficacy in catalysing dialogue, raising consciousness, and fostering social change. Yet, despite this rich tradition, theatre's potential in the realm of environmental communication remains under-explored (Olvera-Hernandez et.al., 2025).

Theatre's distinctive affordances lie in its capacity to embody ecological issues through characters, narrative, and symbolic action. It translates abstract environmental concepts such as biodiversity loss, pollution, or climate change into humanised, relatable stories. Moreover, theatre creates communal experiences where audiences not only witness but feel implicated in the issues performed. This capacity for emotional resonance and embodied learning aligns with Moser's (2016) call for sustainability communication strategies that foster "deep engagement" beyond cognitive processing. Furthermore, theatre's participatory potential makes it particularly suited for contexts where traditional information-heavy communication strategies falter. In rural or marginalised communities, where literacy levels may be low and access to digital platforms limited, theatre offers a culturally resonant, inclusive medium. By relying on oral traditions, communal participation, and local idioms, theatre bridges the accessibility gap while simultaneously fostering collective dialogue about sustainability.

The urgency of exploring alternative communication strategies becomes particularly evident within the Ugandan context. Since the National Resistance Movement (NRM) assumed power in 1986, Uganda has undergone significant economic and social transformations. Yet these gains have come at a steep ecological cost. Rapid population growth, urbanisation, deforestation, industrial waste, and unsustainable agricultural practices have contributed to widespread environmental degradation. Biodiversity loss, declining soil fertility, and poor waste management remain pressing concerns. To address these challenges, the Ugandan government has introduced a suite of policies and legal frameworks, including the National Environment Management Policy (1994), the Energy Policy for Uganda (2002), the Uganda Forestry Policy (2010), the National Forestry and Tree Planting Act (2003), and the National Environment Act. (2019), and the Agricultural Chemicals (Control) Act. (2006), among others.

These instruments demonstrate a formal commitment to environmental sustainability. However, despite these frameworks, compliance remains persistently low. Scholars and policymakers have attributed this shortfall in part to communication challenges: policies and laws are often articulated in highly technical, inconsistent, or inaccessible terms that fail to resonate with local communities (NSOER, 2024). This communication gap reflects what Dilling and Moser (2011) describe as the "translation problem" in sustainability communication, the difficulty of transforming technical, policy-oriented knowledge into accessible, meaningful, and actionable forms for diverse publics. In Uganda, as elsewhere, this problem is exacerbated by the reliance on didactic methods (pamphlets, radio announcements, seminars) that do little to inspire emotional or experiential engagement. Consequently, environmental sustainability remains framed as an abstract, bureaucratic obligation rather than an embodied, lived concern.

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Theatre emerges as a compelling response to this persistent communication gap. Its performative nature allows complex ecological issues to be staged in ways that are accessible, memorable, and emotionally resonant. Unlike static forms of communication, theatre invites active audience participation, generating what Fischer-Lichte (2008) calls the "autopoietic feedback loop" between performers and spectators, a dynamic interaction that fosters shared affect and meaning. Such participatory encounters can transform sustainability from a distant policy issue into a lived communal experience, thereby cultivating deeper investment and responsibility.

The research problem at the heart of this study, therefore, was to assess the efficacy of theatre as a tool for environmental sustainability communication. Specifically, the study asks: To what extent do audiences identify with theatrical performances on environmental themes? How do the dynamics of performance, its narratives, symbols, and embodied actions, generate memorable experiences? Do these experiences enhance recall of environmental issues and shift participants' thinking toward more sustainable practices? By pursuing these questions, the study sought to contribute to both theoretical debates on the role of performance in social transformation and practical efforts to design more inclusive and effective communication strategies for environmental sustainability.

The paper advances the argument that theatre, by virtue of its performative ontology, offers a model of sustainability communication that is both participatory and transformative. This performative model challenges the dominance of linear, top-down communication approaches by foregrounding co-creation, embodiment, and affect. It resonates with emerging scholarship on "transformative sustainability communication" (Adloff & Neckel, 2019), which emphasises the need for communicative practices that reshape worldviews, values, and collective imaginaries. In this sense, theatre can be seen as a practice of "performing sustainability." By staging environmental dilemmas, theatre does not merely depict sustainability but enacts it, inviting audiences into a liminal space where alternative futures can be imagined and rehearsed. This process aligns with Turner's (1982) conception of performance as a site of social drama and transformation, where communities confront tensions, negotiate meanings, and envision new possibilities. Applied to environmental communication, such performative encounters can catalyse shifts in perception and practice that purely informational strategies cannot achieve.

Therefore, the persistent failure of conventional communication strategies to bridge the knowledge–behaviour gap in environmental sustainability highlights the need for more affective, participatory, and culturally resonant approaches. Performance theory provides a robust framework for conceptualising theatre as a mode of sustainability communication that is embodied: visualised, modelled, dialogic, emotive, responsive, and transformative.

The Ugandan case underscores both the urgency of addressing environmental degradation and the inadequacy of existing communication methods. Against this backdrop, this study investigated theatre's potential to perform sustainability: to communicate environmental concerns effectively, to generate memorable experiences, and to inspire responsible action. By situating theatre at the intersection of performance theory and sustainability communication, the study addresses a critical research problem: how can embodied, performative media be harnessed to foster ecological consciousness and behavioural change in ways that technical and didactic strategies falter? The findings not only enrich theoretical understandings of performance as a mode of knowledge production but also inform practical interventions in environmental education, policy dissemination, and community engagement, both within Uganda and globally.

LITERATURE REVIEW

This paper is grounded in the theory of embodied cognition, which posits that knowledge acquisition emerges through the dynamic interplay of perception, sensory, and motoric experiences (Kiefer & Trumpp, 2012; Barsalou,

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1999, 2008; Clark, 2008; Golonka & Wilson, 2012; Lakoff & Johnson, 1999; Pfeifer & Bongard, 2007; Shapiro, 2011; Willems & Francken, 2012; Winn, 2003; Kiefer & Barsalou, 2017). The paper seeks to suggest theatre as an effective mode of environmental sustainability communication rather than the conventional modes (of communication) that rely solely on rational appeals or factual exposition, often struggling to overcome cognitive and emotional barriers.

The proposed communication contrasts, traditional cognitive models that treat cognition as abstract symbol manipulation. The paper appropriates theories of embodied cognition, which posit that information is inseparably tied to perception and action, and that the cognitive process itself is deeply dependent on the material and physical features of the human body (Fugate, Macrine, & Cipriano, 2019). This embodied perspective provides a powerful foundation for understanding theatre as a communicative medium (Xiao, 2024; Solberg, 2022; Blair, 2019; Edinborough, 2016). Theatre is inherently embodied: it brings together performers and audiences in a shared space of sensory experience, combining gesture, voice, movement, and emotion into an immersive form of storytelling (Sugiera, 2017; Bird & Sinclair, 2019; Nellhaus, 2020).

Shapiro (2007, 2011) further agrees with this approach, emphasising that cognition is not detached from the world but occurs in constant, reciprocal interaction with the environment. Because of its embodied and performative qualities, theatre bypasses purely rational processing and reaches audiences at affective and experiential levels (Kiefer & Trumpp, 2012; Shapiro, 2011; Pfeifer & Bongard, 2006). Its strength lies not merely in informing but in transforming-shifting perspectives, inspiring empathy, and fostering collective responsibility for environmental stewardship (Sugiera, 2017; Bird & Sinclair, 2019).

The communicative power of theatre can be situated within several broader communication theories. The transformative capacity of theatre in environmental communication has been explored through various strands of practice. On one hand, didactic approaches emphasise knowledge dissemination, providing information about climate change, biodiversity loss, or pollution. Yet scholarship consistently demonstrates that purely informational theatre has limited impact, particularly when audiences perceive it as lecturing or preaching (Vasconcelos & Vasconcelos, 2022; Winn, 2002; Woo, Mokhtar, Komoo, & Azman, 2012). On the other hand, affective and participatory approaches have proven to be more effective, as they mobilise emotion, stimulate dialogue, and encourage critical reflection. For instance, a performance dramatising the lived consequences of environmental degradation can evoke empathy that raw data cannot, thereby opening pathways for deeper engagement.

This paper, therefore, appropriates the Elaboration Likelihood Model (ELM). ELM distinguishes between the central route to persuasion, based on careful deliberation, and the peripheral route, where attitudes are shaped by affective and heuristic cues (Karoline, Sunarto, Jamalullai, & Ariani, 2023; O'Keefe, 2013; Gotlieb & Swan, 1990). Theatre, with its emotional intensity and immersive qualities, strongly activates the peripheral route. Audiences may be less likely to engage in systematic scrutiny of environmental messages but more likely to be persuaded through embodied experiences of empathy, fear, hope, or identification with characters (Schafer et al., 2014; Buddie, 2023; Bird & Sinclair, 2019; Sugiera, 2017). Therefore, when complex ecological issues are embedded in narrative structures, theatre can influence perceptions of agency and responsibility in ways that rational argumentation alone cannot achieve.

The paper also appropriates the Social Cognitive Theory (SCT) that further underlines theatre's potential by emphasising the role of observational learning in shaping attitudes and behaviours (Schunk, 2012). Through theatrical performance, audiences witness characters encountering ecological crises and experimenting with responses to them (Alexandrowicz, 2024;

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Ahunanya, 2022). This vicarious engagement provides behavioural models that spectators may adopt in their own lives (Kiefer & Trumpp, 2012; Shapiro, 2011; Pfeifer & Bongard, 2006). Eco-theatre, in particular, has shown the capacity to make abstract global issues tangible and actionable by dramatising local challenges, thereby connecting systemic crises with personal responsibility (Schafer et al., 2014; Buddie, 2023; Ahunanya, 2022). Participatory forms of theatre deepen this pedagogical function: when audiences are invited into the creative process-whether through forum theatre, interactive performance, or post-show dialogue-they become not passive consumers but co-creators of meaning and solutions.

This participatory emphasis situates eco-theatre within traditions of community-based performance (Baú, 2018; Sugiera, 2017; Bird& Sinclair, 2019; Power, 2008). Effective engagement requires more than a single performance; it is a collaborative process beginning with building trust, identifying local concerns, and co-creating a work that resonates with the lived experiences of its audiences (Alexandrowicz, 2024). Such collaboration ensures authenticity and strengthens the sense of ownership, thereby increasing the likelihood of sustained environmental action. Post-performance activities are particularly crucial. Discussions, workshops, and interactive installations allow audiences to process their emotional responses, connect the play to their personal realities, and imagine actionable solutions. These facilitated encounters extend the communicative power of the performance beyond the stage, ensuring that the affective impact translates into behavioural change.

Emerging technologies further expand the possibilities of eco-theatre (Glazier, 2012). Virtual reality (VR) and augmented reality (AR) provide immersive platforms that intensify embodied engagement, enabling audiences to experience environmental futures and scenarios with heightened immediacy (Tajtáková, 2014; Glazier, 2012; Botha, 2005). Integrating digital tools with live performance creates hybrid forms of communication that are not only accessible to wider audiences but also capable of delivering more impactful experiences. This intersection of performance and technology thus opens new horizons for eco-theatre's contribution to sustainability communication.

Nevertheless, critical limitations remain. The reach of a theatrical production is inherently bounded by geography and audience capacity. Unlike mass media campaigns, theatre is often localised and ephemeral, raising questions about scalability (Tompkins, 2012; Broth, 2011). Moreover, the success of theatre as an environmental communication tool depends heavily on production quality, audience receptivity, and the facilitators' ability to guide audiences from emotional experience to practical action Andres & Golubchikov, 2016). Theatre can raise awareness, but without follow-up initiatives, the energy generated in performance may dissipate without leading to concrete change. Additionally, not all performances address the complexity of environmental crises equally; while some focus narrowly on issues like deforestation or waste management, others attempt to interrogate broader systems of consumption and inequality (Cho & Roger, 2010). The risk, in either case, lies in oversimplification or in overwhelming audiences with despair rather than empowering them to act.

Despite these limitations, theatre's potential as a catalyst for environmental communication is significant. Its embodied, affective, and participatory dimensions make it a uniquely powerful mode of performance capable of linking knowledge with action, and personal emotion with collective responsibility. By staging environmental crises within narrative frameworks, theatre renders distant problems immediate and abstract issues tangible. Through community participation, it transforms audiences into stakeholders in sustainability conversations. And by integrating new technologies, it promises to extend its reach and impact, fostering more inclusive and immersive forms of environmental learning.

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Nevertheless, the convergence of embodied cognition theory, communication frameworks such as ELM and Social Cognitive Theory, and the participatory practices of eco-theatre provides a robust theoretical foundation for understanding theatre as a potent form of environmental communication. By evoking empathy, modelling sustainable behaviours, and enabling collective reflection, theatre holds unique power to perform sustainability-transforming not only how environmental issues are understood but also how they are acted upon.

METHODOLOGY

This study employed a case study design to enable a detailed exploration of how theatre functions as a medium for environmental communication in community contexts. Case study research is particularly well-suited to inquiries where complex social processes are embedded within particular cultural and geographical settings (Yin, 2018). In order to generate a comprehensive understanding, a mixed-methods approach was adopted, combining quantitative and qualitative strategies. The rationale for this integration was to capture both the measurable dimensions of change in knowledge, attitudes, and behavioural intentions and the more nuanced, interpretive insights into how communities engage with and respond to theatrical interventions (Creswell & Plano Clark, 2018).

The research was conducted in four districts in Uganda's Central Region, namely, Masaka, Mityana, Wakiso, and Mukono. The region was purposively selected for its high industrialisation, and hence prone to environmental sustainability issues, and the four districts provided diverse socio-economic and ecological contexts. The study sample was randomly set at 2,000 participants, consisting of a range of stakeholders who attended and participated in making the performances. It consisted of local community members (1600), theatre practitioners (100), educators (40), civil society leaders (160), and environmental specialists (100). Attention to gender, socio-economic, and cultural diversity. Such diversity in participation not only ensured inclusivity but also allowed the study to integrate audience perspectives with insights from key informants. The variety also ensured that findings captured varied experiences and perspectives. These shaped, interpreted the performances, and assessed the efficacy of theatre in promoting environmental sustainability communication, providing a comprehensive understanding of how theatre communicates environmental sustainability messages.

Theatrical performances consisted of games, puzzles, music, dance, and drama, which constituted the core of the methodological framework and served simultaneously as communication interventions and data collection kits. Plays *Before I Go, Your Hand in Marriage*, and *The Village Chief;* Creative dance choreographies; games like *The Kavera and Tooth Pick*, and *Holding the Rope*; and songs like *Obutonde, I Cry, Don't Litter, No Degradation*, *Tuzuukuke,* and *Perfect Environment*, among others, were composed. These highlighted locally relevant environmental issues. As live, situated events, performances allowed researchers to examine how audiences engaged with environmental themes in real time. They also offered a platform for measuring shifts in awareness, attitudes, and behavioural intentions through pre- and post-performance surveys. The design of these surveys followed established practices in communication research for assessing knowledge change and persuasion (Slater, 2016), with the pre-performance surveys serving as a baseline and the post-performance surveys capturing immediate shifts. Comparison of results enabled the quantification of theatre's short-term cognitive and affective impacts, highlighting which thematic elements or aesthetic strategies proved most effective.

Theatre for Development (TfD) and Forum Theatre methodologies underpinned the performative interventions, emphasising participatory approaches where communities were not only audiences but also co-creators of content. Stories involving bad environmental practices, environmental sustainability management, challenges encountered and strategies to

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overcome the challenges were composed into community-based productions. Interactive segments allowed audiences to intervene directly in simulated scenarios, thereby embodying possible alternatives to unsustainable practices. In line with Boal's (2000) notion of "rehearsal for reality," these interventions provided participants with experiential opportunities to reflect upon and potentially transform their own environmental behaviours. The collaborative creative process itself generated important data, as it revealed local perceptions, indigenous knowledge, and culturally embedded environmental concerns.

Participant observation complemented these methods by capturing the immediacy of audience reactions during performances. Observation provided contextual data on non-verbal responses such as body language, murmurs, laughter, applause, and moments of disengagement that reflected the affective and cognitive engagement of participants. Documenting spontaneous reactions and collective dynamics also offered insights into the social dimensions of audience reception, such as when communities expressed shared resonance with or resistance to particular environmental themes. This immersive method aligned with ethnographic traditions in performance studies, which emphasise the embodied and communal aspects of theatrical experience (Madison, 2018).

Beyond measurable shifts, the project drew on qualitative methods to illuminate the depth and complexity of theatre's communicative processes. 40 participants (10 from each district) in Focus group discussions, consisting of selected theatre practitioners, educators, civil society leaders, and environmental specialists, conducted after performances in each district, provided space for participants to articulate their interpretations, emotional responses, and critical reflections. These group settings encouraged dialogical interaction, allowing the members to co-construct meanings, debate environmental issues, and negotiate the relevance of theatrical narratives within their lived realities. As scholars of performance and development communication argue, theatre creates dialogic spaces where communities can collectively imagine and rehearse social change (Boal, 2000; Mda, 1993).

In-depth interviews with 10 key informants per district, consisting of directors, actors, educators, community leaders, and environmental activists, further enriched the qualitative data. These conversations provided insider perspectives on how messages were conceived, crafted, and performed, as well as on the challenges of balancing aesthetic expression with pedagogical intent. They also shed light on the collaborative processes between theatre practitioners and environmental stakeholders, demonstrating how content, form, and performance strategies were negotiated to ensure accessibility and cultural resonance. Such perspectives were critical in situating theatre within both local creative practices and broader discourses of sustainability communication (Schechner, 2013).

The integration of quantitative and qualitative methods made it possible to triangulate findings and provide a multidimensional evaluation of theatre's role in environmental communication. While surveys quantified immediate impacts, focus groups and interviews uncovered the processes of meaning-making, and participant observation captured embodied engagement in situ. This combination of methods extended the evaluation beyond short-term effects, enabling consideration of longer-term implications and the conditions necessary for sustaining positive environmental practices. By situating theatre within its cultural, social, and ecological contexts, the methodology underscored its potential not merely as a medium for transmitting information but as a participatory process of dialogue, reflection, and collective imagination.

Overall, the research design was an interdisciplinary orientation, drawing from performance studies, communication theory, and sustainability science. It aligned with calls within environmental communication research for methodologies that attend to both the cognitive and affective dimensions of engagement (Nisbet, 2016), while foregrounding the cultural and performative practices through which

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communities make sense of environmental challenges. By embedding evaluation within live performance contexts and privileging both participant voices and observable behaviours, this approach advances understanding of theatre not simply as a tool of advocacy but as a performative practice capable of cultivating sustainable futures.

DATA ANALYSIS AND DISCUSSION

Data analysis for this study employed a mixed-methods approach, integrating both quantitative and qualitative strategies to provide an in-depth understanding of theatre's role in environmental sustainability communication. Utilising a convergent parallel design, quantitative and qualitative data were collected and analysed independently but within the same time frame, enabling triangulation and a richer interpretation of the results (Creswell & Plano Clark, 2017). Pre and post-performance surveys captured measurable changes in environmental awareness, attitudes, and behavioural intentions, while qualitative data from focus groups, interviews, and participant observations were examined thematically to uncover underlying meanings, emotional responses, and contextual interpretations. The integration of these datasets allowed the research team to confirm, contrast, or complement findings, producing a holistic perspective on theatre's effectiveness as an educational and communicative tool (Atlasti, 2023).

An explanatory sequential approach further enhanced the analytical rigour, with quantitative survey data serving as the foundation for subsequent qualitative inquiry (Ivankova, 2006). Patterns in knowledge acquisition, attitudinal shifts, and behavioural intentions were first identified through statistical analysis, highlighting both areas of improvement and instances where behaviour change was limited. These results informed the design of focus groups and interviews, which explored the motivations, perceptions, and barriers influencing audience engagement. By sequentially linking quantitative and qualitative phases, this approach provided nuanced insights into observed trends and addressed inconsistencies in the survey data, contextualising the numerical findings with participant narratives (Atlasti, 2023).

Given the culturally diverse context of the study, an exploratory sequential design was employed to ensure that the research instruments reflected local perspectives and cultural expressions (Atlasti, 2023). Initial qualitative engagement, including interviews with key informants and observations of rehearsals and performances, revealed community interpretations of environmental themes and informed the development of structured survey instruments. These surveys were subsequently administered to a larger audience, allowing the validation and generalisation of initial qualitative findings. This process ensured that both the content and delivery of the surveys were culturally and contextually appropriate.

An embedded design complemented these approaches, integrating qualitative insights into the primarily quantitative framework. While surveys provided measurable evidence of attitudinal change, qualitative data offered contextual depth, illustrating how audiences internalised and expressed environmental messages. This combination enhanced interpretive richness, allowing statistical trends to be illustrated through participant quotes and case examples, and highlighting theatre's capacity to humanise complex environmental issues (Greene, Caracelli, & Graham, 1989).

Results indicated a high level of environmental awareness among local community respondents. Participants consistently emphasised theatre's ability to simplify complex environmental issues, foster emotional engagement, and stimulate community dialogue. Audience members reported increased awareness, motivation to engage in sustainable practices, and participation in local environmental initiatives. For example, 85% of the local community participants reported a high degree of awareness: 40% were very aware, while 45% were somewhat aware. Only 15% of participants indicated no awareness of environmental issues, highlighting a generally informed audience.

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Regarding preferred methods of environmental sustainability communication, theatre emerged as the most favoured approach, with 50% of the local community respondents selecting it over social media (30%), workshops or seminars (12.5%), and printed materials such as flyers or brochures (7.5%). This preference underscores the perceived effectiveness and appeal of performance-based interventions for conveying sustainability messages.

Behavioural intentions following the theatre performance were notably positive. Half of the local community respondents (50%) reported a strong intent to change their behaviour, and an additional 37.5% indicated a moderate intent, resulting in a cumulative 87.5% expressing a willingness to take environmentally responsible actions. This suggests that theatre not only raised awareness but also stimulated actionable intentions. Participants' satisfaction with the theatre experience was similarly very high. 90% of the local community respondents rated the performance as either very satisfied (60%) or satisfied (30%), whereas only a small minority expressed dissatisfaction (2.5%). This high level of satisfaction reflects the engaging and impactful nature of theatre as a communication medium.

Recall of key environmental messages was equally strong, with 75% of the local community participants reporting clear recall and 20% reporting partial recall. Only 5% indicated no retention of the content, demonstrating the effectiveness of theatre in facilitating message retention and comprehension. On the other hand, motivation to act after the performance was realised at 90% of the local community respondents, with 55% feeling strongly motivated and 35% somewhat motivated. This indicates that theatre not only communicates critical environmental information but also inspires participants to engage in environmentally responsible behaviours.

Overall, the statistical analysis demonstrates that theatre is an effective tool for environmental sustainability communication. Local community participants showed high awareness, preference for theatre as a communication medium, positive behavioural intentions, satisfaction, message retention, and motivation to act.

A snippet into descriptive responses from Key Informants indicates an overwhelming consensus that theatre simplifies and humanises complex environmental issues, creating emotional connections that facilitate deeper understanding, as follows:

Theatre serves as an effective tool in environmental communication because it simplifies complex ideas. People understand and connect with issues such as climate change through stories that are emotional and relatable. **(Theatre Director).**

I believe theatre has a unique ability to bring environmental issues to life in ways that traditional media cannot. It allows for deep emotional connections, which can be transformative. **(Actor)**

It provides an accessible platform for discussions that would otherwise be difficult for many audiences to engage with, especially those with low literacy levels. The physicality of performance also conveys urgency. **(Educator)**

On the perceived impact of theatre on the audience, the following responses were captured:

After attending the performances, there was a noticeable uptick in community conversations about the importance of reducing plastic waste, indiscriminate use of herbicides, and people were more conscious of their personal consumption habits. **(Environmental Activist).**

The different theatre dynamics like characterisation, setting, costumes, props, and directorial aspects of composition, picturization, emphasis and subordination led to memorable experiences for both the audience/ participants. (**Community Leader**).

Many audience members expressed newfound motivation to get involved with local environmental groups after watching the play. The

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performance stirred a collective sense of responsibility. **(Educator).**

Audience members often mention how the performance triggered emotions like fear and hope, pushing them to take individual actions, such as reducing energy consumption. **(Actor).**

Conclusively, respondents generally observed positive impacts on audience awareness, with many noting an increased willingness to engage in sustainable practices. These findings underscore the potential of performance-based interventions to raise awareness and promote actionable engagement with sustainability initiatives. These findings, hence, position theatre as a transformative vehicle for sustainable environmental communication. When strategically deployed, it not only educates and inspires but also cultivates enduring community action, advancing the broader goals of sustainability and environmental stewardship.

CONCLUSION

The findings of this study underscore theatre's substantial potential as a dynamic medium for promoting environmental awareness and fostering sustainable behaviour. Evidence from pre- and pos- performance surveys, interviews, focus group discussions, and performance observations consistently demonstrates that theatre engages audiences both emotionally and cognitively, transforming complex environmental issues into relatable narratives. Participants not only exhibited heightened awareness and strong recall of environmental messages but also expressed tangible intentions to adopt sustainable practices following exposure to environmental theatre. This reinforces theatre's unique capacity to bridge the gap between knowledge and action, turning abstract concepts into lived experiences that resonate deeply with diverse audiences.

Key informant perspectives further highlight theatre's unparalleled ability to transcend literacy and cultural barriers, ensuring that critical sustainability messages reach broader and more heterogeneous populations. Despite challenges such as limited funding, technical constraints, audience engagement difficulties, and the inherent difficulty of measuring long-term behavioural impact and mindset change, the study affirms that theatre fosters meaningful dialogue, community reflection, and collective ownership of environmental solutions. Its participatory nature encourages active engagement, positioning theatre not merely as an educational tool for sustainable environmental communication but as a catalyst for grassroots advocacy and societal transformation.

Recommendations

In light of these findings, several strategic recommendations emerge. Recommendations from key informants emphasised greater institutional support, partnerships with environmental organisations, and sustained funding to extend performances and follow-up initiatives. First, environmental theatre should be systematically integrated into national and community-level environmental communication frameworks, particularly in rural and semi-urban contexts where conventional media are less effective. Such integration can be facilitated through collaborations among theatre practitioners, environmental organisations, government agencies, and educational institutions. Second, targeted investment in the training and capacity building of theatre artists, educators, and facilitators is essential to produce content that is scientifically accurate, culturally resonant, and creatively compelling. Funding mechanisms should be strengthened to support diverse performance modalities, including mobile theatre units and school-based programs, ensuring accessibility and continuity. Third, robust tools for long-term impact evaluation should be developed to capture sustained attitudinal and behavioural changes, providing empirical evidence to refine and scale theatre-based interventions. Finally, embedding regular community engagement activities, post-performance discussions, and follow-up initiatives will reinforce key messages, transforming theatre from a one-off event into an enduring educational and social intervention.

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