

Social Media as a Means of Environmental Advocacy: A Study of the #Saynotostyrofoam Campaign

Rihadatul Wasilah¹, Nana Sutikna², Mite Setiansah³

^{1,2,3}Jenderal Soedirman University

ABSTRACT: In the long term, the involvement of media partners not only expanded the campaign's reach but also created corporate accountability by exposing companies that continued to use Styrofoam. Intensive coverage established a media precedent that facilitated similar campaigns in the future, while also creating a public archive of the Styrofoam issue that remained accessible even after the campaign ended. Thus, media partners served as a pillar of transformation, transforming #SayNoToStyrofoam from a mere social media hashtag into a sustainable social movement with a tangible impact on policy and public behavior. The research found that Instagram served as a primary platform for delivering emotional and interactive visual messages, while the official website served as a trusted information hub, bolstering the campaign's credibility. Collaboration with media partners successfully expanded the campaign's reach beyond environmental activist circles and lent social legitimacy to the movement. While the campaign generated high public engagement and drove some behavioral changes at the business level, the research identified several key challenges. These challenges included social media algorithm bias that limited reach, the gap between awareness and concrete action, and the echo chamber effect among supporters who already had environmental concerns. The implications of this research emphasize the importance of a multi-strategy approach that combines the power of digital media with cross-sector collaboration to create sustainable impact. These findings provide an important contribution to understanding the potential and limitations of social media as an environmental advocacy tool in the digital age.

KEYWORDS: environmental advocacy, social media, styrofoam, digital campaign, environmental communication

I. INTRODUCTION

The environmental issue of plastic waste has become a widespread topic of international discussion. This environmental issue is crucial because it can impact the quality of human life in the future. According to the United Nations Environment Programme (UNEP), Indonesia ranks third as the world's largest contributor of plastic waste, with plastic waste reaching 3.4 million tons annually. This increasing amount of plastic waste is caused by various factors, including the lack of adequate waste management infrastructure in various regions in Indonesia. Much waste in Indonesia is not transported or handled and ends up in landfills (TPA), which can cause health problems, social problems, and environmental degradation as well as low aesthetic value. Waste itself consists of various types of waste, including organic and non-organic waste, as well as electronic waste. Non-organic waste consists of items such as paper, plastic, wood, metal, cloth, glass, leather, etc. Plastic waste is a major problem because its complex carbon chain makes it difficult to degrade naturally. According to the 2023 National Waste Management Information System (SIPSN) of the Ministry of Environment and Forestry, as of July 24, 2024, 290 regencies/cities in Indonesia reported a total national waste accumulation of 31.9 million tons. Of this figure, approximately 63.3%, or 20.5 million tons, was successfully managed, while 35.67% (11.3 million tons) remained unmanaged. Meanwhile, the volume of plastic waste—particularly plastic bags—has increased sharply over the past decade. The majority of plastic waste comes from food and beverage packaging, consumer products, shopping bags, and other packaging materials. However, only 10–15% of plastic waste is recycled. The majority (60–70%) ends up in landfills (TPA), and another 15–30% is released into the environment without adequate management.

The latest data from the Ministry of Environment and Forestry (KLHK) reveals that plastic and Styrofoam waste are the largest contributors to pollution in Indonesia's coastal and marine areas, accounting for 60-70% of total marine debris. This fact is particularly concerning considering that Styrofoam contains polystyrene, a material that is difficult to decompose and has the potential to release carcinogenic substances if accumulated in aquatic ecosystems. Although the dangers of Styrofoam to the environment and health have long been known, its use remains widespread, particularly in the culinary industry (as food/drink containers) and retail (as product packaging). A 2023 survey by the Ministry of Environment and Forestry noted that 72% of culinary Small, Micro, and Medium Enterprises (MSMEs) still rely on Styrofoam due to its low cost and practicality. The main factor perpetuating this practice is low public awareness of its long-term impacts. For example:

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1. Consumer habits: The majority of shoppers do not bring their own containers and consider styrofoam the norm.
2. Limited education: Lack of campaigns about environmentally friendly alternatives (e.g., banana leaves, bioplastics).
3. Loose regulations: Only 18 of Indonesia's 514 regions have strict rules banning styrofoam.

As the capital of Indonesia, Jakarta is facing a crucial environmental problem related to plastic waste. With a population exceeding 10 million people and rapid urbanization, the volume of waste in the city continues to increase every year. Data from the Jakarta Environmental Agency reveals that the capital city produces more than 7,500 tons of waste per day, with 34% of it being plastic waste. The plastic problem is a major concern because this material is difficult to decompose, even taking hundreds of years to decompose naturally. The accumulation of plastic waste not only pollutes the soil and water but also threatens human health and the survival of various living creatures. Several factors that exacerbate this situation include low public awareness of the importance of reducing, recycling, and managing plastic waste sustainably, and an ineffective waste management system, causing much plastic waste to end up in rivers like the Ciliwung, which eventually flows into the sea and worsens marine pollution. With these problems, there are also very serious impacts caused by plastic waste, including ecological, economic, and environmental aspects. The ecological impacts include damage to aquatic and terrestrial ecosystems, including disrupted soil fertility and animal deaths due to entanglement or ingestion of plastic. The economic impacts include decreased productivity in the fisheries and tourism sectors due to pollution. Environmental impacts include disruption of water absorption and air circulation in the soil, significantly impacting overall environmental quality (Arico & Jayanti, 2018). If not addressed promptly, the accumulation of plastic waste will increasingly threaten the balance of nature. As Nenny Makmun (2019) points out, the elastic, waterproof, and difficult-to-decompose nature of plastic makes it a persistent pollutant that has the potential to damage the soil in the long term.

According to a report from the Directorate General of Waste and Environmental Damage Control (Ditjen PPKL) of the Ministry of Environment and Forestry, plastic waste is a type of waste that causes serious environmental impacts. This threat arises due to two main factors: its increasing volume and its non-biodegradable nature. Plastic is classified as a xenobiotic pollutant, a foreign substance that cannot be recognized by the environment's biological systems, so it tends to accumulate in nature. As part of inorganic waste, plastic requires a very long decomposition time, around 100-500 years to fully decompose (Indonesia Environment & Energy Center, 2016). The main difficulty in decomposing plastic lies in its complex carbon chain structure, which prevents it from being broken down by decomposing microorganisms. This characteristic is what causes the natural process of plastic waste decomposition to take a very long time in nature.

Styrofoam is one of the largest contributors to plastic waste in Jakarta. This packaging material, made from expanded polystyrene (EPS), is widely used for food and beverage containers due to its practicality, light weight, and low cost. However, this practicality creates serious environmental problems because Styrofoam is very difficult to decompose naturally and is almost impossible to recycle effectively. As a result, this material continues to accumulate in the environment and pollutes soil and water bodies. The problem is further complicated by the fact that Styrofoam contains styrene, a hazardous chemical that can negatively impact human health. This substance can cause irritation to the skin, eyes, and respiratory tract, and even potentially trigger cancer if exposed to it over the long term. Health risks increase when Styrofoam is used as a container for hot food, because styrene can migrate and contaminate the food or beverage consumed. The negative impacts go beyond humans and damage the ecosystem as a whole. Over time, discarded Styrofoam decomposes into microplastic particles that enter the food chain, especially marine life. Ultimately, these harmful particles can be released into humans through the consumption of contaminated seafood. This situation demonstrates the serious threat posed by Styrofoam use and underscores the need for immediate action to reduce its use.

On the other hand, developments in information and communication technology have opened up new opportunities for advocacy and social campaigns through digital media, particularly social media. Platforms like Instagram, Twitter (now X), and TikTok are now not only places to share personal information but also strategic platforms for disseminating social messages, including environmental issues. With its viral power and ability to reach diverse segments of society quickly and widely, social media has become an effective tool for shaping public opinion and encouraging behavioral change. One movement that utilizes social media as an environmental campaign tool is the #SayNoToStyrofoam campaign. This campaign aims to educate the public about the dangers of Styrofoam use and encourage a shift to more environmentally friendly packaging alternatives. Through various digital content such as infographics, educational videos, and testimonials, this campaign seeks to build collective awareness and encourage the public to participate in the movement to reduce Styrofoam use.

However, with the rise of digital campaigns, questions have arisen about the effectiveness of social media as a means of environmental advocacy. Do these campaigns truly influence public awareness and behavior? To what extent does public participation in digital campaigns translate into concrete action?

Based on this background, this study will examine in depth the role of social media in the #SayNoToStyrofoam campaign as a form of environmental advocacy, with a focus on message delivery strategies, campaign reach, and community response and involvement.

II. LITERATURE REVIEW

2.1. Social Media as a Means of Communication

Social media is part of the development of digital communication technology that allows users to create, share, and exchange information online. Kaplan and Haenlein (2010) define social media as a group of internet-based applications built on the ideological and technological foundations of Web 2.0, which enable the creation and exchange of user content.

The main characteristics of social media are interactivity, openness, and participation. Social media provides a space for the public to not only receive information but also provide feedback, disseminate that information, and participate in digital conversations. This makes social media a highly potent two-way communication tool for building public opinion and conveying campaign messages, including advocacy campaigns. In the context of mass communication, social media has become a new form of media that is more personal, horizontal, and participatory. Not only individuals, but institutions, organizations, and governments also utilize social media to reach audiences more effectively.

2.2. Environmental Advocacy

Environmental advocacy is an organized effort to influence public policy, public awareness, and social behavior in the context of environmental protection and preservation. According to McKenzie (2001), environmental advocacy encompasses various strategies such as public campaigns, policy lobbying, education, and community mobilization.

The primary goal of environmental advocacy is to raise awareness and influence individual and collective behavior toward greater concern for environmental sustainability. In the digital age, advocacy strategies are no longer limited to conventional approaches like outreach or demonstrations, but also encompass digital approaches such as social media campaigns, online petitions, and hashtag movements.

2.3. Digital Campaigns and Hashtag Movements

A digital campaign refers to a series of communication activities designed to achieve specific objectives through digital media. In social and environmental contexts, digital campaigns are used to disseminate advocacy messages, build public support, and encourage concrete action from the community. One popular form of digital campaign is hashtag-based movements, which allow campaign content to be aggregated and recognized through the same keywords across multiple platforms. Hashtags like #SayNoToStyrofoam serve as a tool for organizing digital discourse, expanding the reach of messages and creating a sense of collective action. Hashtags also make it easier for users to find relevant information and follow developments on issues in real time.

According to Bruns and Burgess (2011), the use of hashtags in social campaigns has the potential to create open discussion spaces that are democratic and horizontal, thus enabling participation from various community groups.

2.4. Relevant Communication Theories

2.4.1. Agenda Setting Theory

This theory states that the media has the power to influence what topics the public deems important. Through intense coverage or the dissemination of messages on social media, the issue of the dangers of Styrofoam can be brought to the forefront of public attention. The #SayNoToStyrofoam campaign seeks to place this environmental issue on the public agenda.

III. RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

3.1. Research Methods

This research uses a qualitative approach with a case study. This approach was chosen because it allows researchers to deeply understand the processes, strategies, and meanings embedded in the #SayNoToStyrofoam social media campaign as a form of environmental advocacy. This case study was chosen because it represents a specific, current, and representative campaign in the context of using social media as an environmental campaign tool. This approach allows researchers to comprehensively explore how the campaign was executed and how audiences responded to it.

3.2. Data Collection Sources and Techniques

3.2.1. Data Primer

According to Sugiyono (2019), primary data is a data source that provides data to data collectors. Data is collected directly without using intermediaries. This data is obtained through observations of how The Antheia Project runs the campaign at the campaign's core event, Beach Clean Up (BCU). Then, researchers will also conduct interviews with informants, consisting of three people: 1 Co-Founder of The Antheia Project itself and 2 others who are heads of various fields within The Antheia Project.

3.2.2. Data Secondary

According to Sugiyono (2019), secondary data is a data source that does not directly provide data to researchers or data collectors. Researchers gather useful data from study literature to support the initial data. This data comes from the internet, books, and journals. Some data is also available from official websites, such as the United Nations Environment Programme (UNEP), the National Research and Innovation Agency (BRIN), and the Ministry of Environment and Forestry (KLHK).

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3.4. Data Analysis Techniques

According to Miles, Huberman & Saldana (2014), analysis consists of three simultaneous streams of activity: data reduction, data presentation, and drawing conclusions. This simultaneous occurrence means that data reduction, presentation, and drawing conclusions are cyclical and interactive processes that occur before, during, and after data collection, parallel to each other, resulting in a general understanding of what is actually happening. In qualitative research, data analysis techniques include interview transcripts, data reduction, analysis, interpretation, and triangulation. From the results of this analysis, conclusions can be drawn.

IV. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The use of Instagram, the official website, and media partners in the #SayNoToStyrofoam campaign creates a complementary, integrated communications approach to expand the reach of the campaign. and strengthen environmental messages. Instagram has become a key platform in the #SayNoToStyrofoam campaign due to its ability to convey environmental messages through a strong and interactive visual approach. As a platform dominated by image and video content, Instagram allows the campaign to showcase the impact of Styrofoam in real-world settings, such as photos of Styrofoam littering beaches or documentaries about its dangers to marine ecosystems. This type of content is not only informative but also successfully evokes an emotional response—whether it be concern, anger, or a call to action—that is difficult to achieve through text alone. Instagram features like Reels, Stories, and IG Live are utilized to their full potential to create dynamic and shareable content. For example, short Reels feature tutorials on replacing Styrofoam with reusable containers, or Stories feature polls to gauge followers' awareness of the issue.

Additionally, Instagram facilitated the formation of a strong digital community around the #SayNoToStyrofoam campaign. Using hashtags, the campaign successfully gathered user-generated content from various segments of society, from environmental activists and business owners to celebrities. Collaborations with micro- and macro-influencers—especially those focused on sustainable lifestyles—helped broaden the message's reach. For example, a culinary influencer might post content about a restaurant switching from Styrofoam to eco-friendly packaging, while challenging their followers to do the same. Challenges like the #NoStyrofoamChallenge or the hashtag #StyrofoamFreeIndonesia went viral thanks to the active participation of Instagram users, who not only posted their support but also tagged friends or local businesses to get involved. The Instagram Guides feature is also used to curate educational content, such as lists of alternatives to Styrofoam or links to research articles on its impact. Meanwhile, IG Live often hosts live discussions with environmental experts, doctors, or business owners who have committed to reducing Styrofoam, providing a space for audiences to ask questions and engage in real-time. This interactivity deepens public understanding while building a sense of shared ownership of the campaign.

However, the use of Instagram in the #SayNoToStyrofoam campaign also faces challenges. Instagram's constantly changing algorithm can impact the organic reach of content, especially if it's deemed "unentertaining" compared to other popular trends. Furthermore, despite high engagement, converting likes and shares into concrete actions—such as stopping the mass use of Styrofoam—remains a challenge. To address this, the campaign team isn't relying solely on one-way content but is encouraging audiences to take concrete actions, such as submitting a petition through a link in their bio or attending offline events organized through Instagram. In this way, Instagram serves not only as a voice for the #SayNoToStyrofoam campaign but also as a mobilization platform that connects awareness with action. Its visual power, interactivity, and community network make Instagram a highly effective tool for environmental advocacy in the digital age, although it needs to be balanced with a cross-platform strategy to ensure a sustainable impact.

Meanwhile, the official website serves as an information hub, providing comprehensive data, in-depth articles, and educational resources about alternatives to Styrofoam. The website also enhances the campaign's credibility by allowing audiences to access verified information, unlike social media content that is prone to distortion or hoaxes. Furthermore, the website can be used to garner broader support, for example through online petitions or volunteer sign-ups. The official website serves as the intellectual and operational foundation of the #SayNoToStyrofoam campaign, providing a comprehensive digital space for in-depth education, resource mobilization, and documentation of the movement's progress. Unlike social media, which is limited to short, viral content, the website allows for structured, detailed, and continuously updated information—from scientific data on the health and environmental dangers of Styrofoam to global policy reports on restricting its use. Dedicated pages like "Styrofoam Facts" can include interactive infographics showing Styrofoam's decomposition time (up to 500 years) or its impact on the food chain, while a "Solutions" section lists eco-friendly packaging alternatives along with case studies of businesses that have made the transition. This content is not only intended for the general public but also serves as a resource for journalists, researchers, or government officials who need accurate data to support their reporting or policy.

The website also serves as a collaborative hub by providing a platform for various stakeholders. The "Our Partners" page displays the logos of companies, MSMEs, or NGOs supporting the campaign, enhancing the movement's legitimacy. Meanwhile, blogs and opinion pieces written by environmental experts, doctors, or entrepreneurs serve as a forum for multidisciplinary discussions. For businesses, a dedicated "How to Switch from Styrofoam" guide includes a cost analysis, a list of alternative

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packaging suppliers, and even templates for communicating with customers about the packaging policy change. Media partners are provided with a comprehensive press kit (including photos, videos, and core data), making it easier for them to create coverage without having to build materials from scratch. The main challenges of using a website include intensive content management (requiring a dedicated team for regular updates) and uneven internet access in some areas. However, by optimizing SEO (Search Engine Optimization), website content can appear in Google search results when people search for information about Styrofoam, extending the campaign's longevity beyond social media trends. Integration with social media (e.g., embedding Instagram feeds or share buttons) also maintains traffic flow between the website and other platforms.

Furthermore, collaboration with media partners, both conventional mass media and digital platforms, helped expand the campaign's impact beyond the circle of environmental activists. In the #SayNoToStyrofoam campaign, media partners played a strategic role, expanding reach and providing social legitimacy to the movement. Collaboration with various media—from newspapers, television, radio, to digital platforms—created a resonance effect that amplified environmental messages to segments of society that might not be reached through social media or official websites. Media partners served as bridges connecting environmental activists with mainstream audiences, including adults and communities in rural areas who rely more on conventional media for information.

The involvement of media partners in this campaign works through several important mechanisms. First, the media helps disseminate messages in a multi-channel and repetitive manner, creating a drip marketing effect that reinforces public awareness of the Styrofoam issue. Local newspapers can run investigative articles about piles of Styrofoam waste in landfills, while national television stations broadcast panel discussions with environmental experts about the dangers of microplastics. Online news portals supplement their coverage with data-driven reports, such as on Styrofoam import trends in Indonesia, while community radio stations broadcast interactive dialogues with sources from the campaign team. This multi-format approach ensures that the message is not only delivered but also embedded in the public consciousness through repetition and contextualization tailored to the characteristics of each audience.

Second, media partners are able to build a more complex and balanced narrative than social media content, which tends to be short and emotional. In-depth reporting by professional journalists—such as exclusive interviews with chemists about the hazardous compounds in Styrofoam or firsthand reporting from the recycling industry—provides analytical depth that transforms the campaign from a mere moral movement into an evidence-based discussion. Reporting that includes diverse perspectives, including voices from business actors for and against the Styrofoam ban, also creates a richer public discussion and impacts policymaking.

Third, the involvement of trusted media outlets provided legitimacy, elevating the campaign from mere digital activism to a pressing national issue. When major media outlets like Kompas or Tempo began intensively covering #SayNoToStyrofoam, a significant transfer of credibility occurred. This media agenda-setting effect not only influenced public opinion but also prompted responses from policymakers, as evidenced by the holding of hearings at the Regional People's Representative Council (DPRD) level in response to public pressure mediated by news coverage.

In the long term, the involvement of media partners not only broadens the campaign's reach but also creates corporate accountability by exposing companies that continue to use Styrofoam. Intensive coverage establishes a media precedent that facilitates similar campaigns in the future, while also creating a public archive of the Styrofoam issue that remains accessible even after the campaign ends. Thus, media partners serve as pillars of transformation, transforming #SayNoToStyrofoam from a mere social media hashtag into a sustainable social movement with a real impact on policy and public behavior.

The research results show that the #SayNoToStyrofoam campaign successfully utilized social media as a means of environmental advocacy. In terms of public engagement, the campaign content received a high response in the form of likes, shares, and comments, especially on platforms like Instagram. The hashtag experienced rapid growth, with thousands of users—including environmental organizations, influencers, and the general public—sharing it, thus increasing the campaign's message's virality. Furthermore, surveys and interviews revealed that the campaign successfully raised public awareness about the dangers of Styrofoam for the environment, particularly regarding its impact on marine pollution and health. Several restaurants and culinary businesses have even begun switching to environmentally friendly packaging in response to the campaign. At the policy level, advocacy through social media has also attracted the attention of the government and stakeholders, although no firm regulations have yet been issued. However, the campaign has not been without obstacles, such as resistance from industries that still rely on Styrofoam and the challenge of maintaining consistent public participation.

In a more in-depth discussion, this study revealed that the success of the #SayNoToStyrofoam campaign was inseparable from creative content strategies, such as the use of videos showing the impact of Styrofoam on marine animals, infographics of scientific data, and collaboration with influencers with wide reach. This aligns with environmental communication theory, which emphasizes the importance of impact visualization to arouse public empathy. Compared to similar campaigns, such as #SaveTheTurtles, #SayNoToStyrofoam is unique because it focuses on alternative solutions to Styrofoam, rather than simply banning it. However, the study also found limitations, such as bias in social media algorithms that cause messages to only reach certain groups, as well as challenges in converting awareness into concrete action on a large scale. The implication of these

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findings is the importance of multi-stakeholder collaboration, including government, business actors, and local communities, to strengthen the impact of environmental advocacy in the digital world. Thus, social media has proven to be a potential tool for environmental movements, although it needs to be supported by a sustainable and inclusive strategy.

In addition to the aforementioned achievements, the study also found that the #SayNoToStyrofoam campaign successfully created a collaborative network between environmental activists, academics, and businesses. Several companies began adopting environmentally friendly policies by replacing Styrofoam packaging, largely due to consumer pressure influenced by the campaign. Furthermore, the movement also sparked broader public discussion about producers' responsibility in managing waste, particularly regarding extended producer responsibility (EPR). However, despite the campaign's success in raising awareness, a gap remains between knowledge and action. Many respondents admitted to being aware of the dangers of Styrofoam but have not fully changed their consumption habits due to convenience or the higher price of environmentally friendly alternatives.

Finally, this study provides a critical perspective on the echo chamber effect in digital environmental advocacy. The #SayNoToStyrofoam campaign was largely followed by groups already concerned about environmental issues, while the audiences most needed to be reached—such as industry players or consumers still dependent on Styrofoam—were under-exposed. The implication is that environmental campaigns on social media need to be designed to transcend the algorithmic bubble, for example through cross-sector collaboration or a messaging approach tailored to the values of the target group.

V. CONCLUSIONS

The #SayNoToStyrofoam campaign has successfully leveraged social media, particularly Instagram, as an effective environmental advocacy tool to raise public awareness about the dangers of Styrofoam to the environment and health. Through emotional and interactive visual content, the campaign has successfully built high levels of public engagement, including collaborations with influencers and media partners to expand its reach. The official website serves as a credible information hub, while media partners help strengthen the campaign's legitimacy and encourage broader public discussion. While the campaign has had positive impacts, such as behavioral changes among businesses and increased public awareness, several challenges still hamper its effectiveness. These include social media algorithm bias that limits reach, a gap between awareness and action, and the echo chamber effect that prevents the message from reaching the target groups most in need.

The implications of this research emphasize the importance of a multi-strategy approach that combines the power of digital media with cross-sector collaboration, including government, business, and local communities, to create sustainable impact. Thus, social media has proven to be a potential tool for environmental advocacy, but it needs to be supported by an inclusive and sustainable strategy to overcome existing limitations. The #SayNoToStyrofoam campaign also demonstrates that collective behavior change requires more than just information dissemination—it requires a holistic approach, including ongoing education, incentives for businesses, and regulatory support from the government. Collaboration with academics and industry players has opened up discussions about alternative solutions, such as eco-friendly packaging and the implementation of sustainable principles. Extended producer responsibility (EPR). However, research reveals that economic factors, such as the higher price of alternatives and consumer habits, remain significant barriers to reducing Styrofoam use significantly.

In addition, this campaign highlights the challenges echo chamber on social media, where messages often resonate only with those who already care about the environment. To achieve a broader impact, creative strategies are needed that can penetrate bubble algorithms, for example through a popular culture approach, collaboration with community leaders, or campaigns in local communities that are less exposed to environmental issues. Overall, #SayNoToStyrofoam serves as a clear example of how social media can be a catalyst for change, but also serves as a reminder that social transformation requires more than mere virality. Long-term success depends on the integration of digital awareness, concrete action, supportive policies, and the collective commitment of all stakeholders. These findings offer valuable lessons for other environmental movements in designing campaigns that are not only inspiring but also inclusive and impactful.

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