



RESEARCH PAPER

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Project SILONG: Engaging college students in climate change advocacy campaign through the use of social media

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Abstract

The urgency of climate change mitigation calls for empowering the youth to actively participate in raising awareness and advocating for environmental preservation. This research presents "Project SILONG," an Environmental Advocacy Plan aimed at engaging college students through social media to address climate change challenges. The objectives of the campaign are to determine the current level of awareness among college students about climate change problems, heighten their awareness on these issues, enable them to employ proactive measures for climate change mitigation, and effectively communicate climate change strategies. The plan targets college students enrolled at Pangasinan State University, many of whom come from low-income families heavily reliant on farming and fishing. Given the vulnerability of their communities to natural disasters and climate impacts, the youth's involvement becomes crucial. Social media, particularly Facebook, is chosen as the platform due to its widespread use among students, with 92% having active accounts. Key messages emphasize the reality of climate change, the significance of education and youth empowerment, and the potential of social media in driving change. The plan includes strategic posting of educational materials, live-streamed webinars, and contests to increase engagement. Collaboration with environmental organizations and student clubs further amplifies the campaign's reach. A pilot test involving students and experts resulted in valuable feedback, ensuring the plan's factualness, accuracy, timeliness, and relevance. The average rating of 14.25 indicates the plan's efficacy in engaging college students and promoting climate change awareness. The Project SILONG presents a comprehensive and timely advocacy plan to harness the power of social media in mobilizing college students towards climate change mitigation. The plan's practicality and relevance make it a valuable reference for other advocates aiming to empower the youth for sustainable change. Further, conducting pilot tests with a larger audience is recommended to enhance the plan's effectiveness and impact. With united efforts and active participation, the youth can play a crucial role in building a climate-resilient society for future generations.

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Introduction

The youth plays a pivotal role in climate change adaptation. Hence, there is a need to enhance their awareness and participation to mitigate the problem. Having a rising population globally, the youth has an increasingly strong social and environmental participation that could lead to the development of a low-carbon emission society (Wibby, 2013). The United Nations (2004) reported that youth make up 18% of the world's population with majority (87%) living in developing countries. Increasing the level of their awareness on climate change could therefore promote the creation of a climate resilient society especially in the developing countries. Their youth, energy and knowledge could be tapped in raising awareness, creating educational program through various platforms and channels, conserving the nature, promoting renewable energy use, adopting environmentally sound practices, implementing adaptation and mitigation projects (Wibby, 2013). They possess significant qualities which when appointed could serve as important resources for households and communities in preparing for, responding to, and recovering from disasters (Fernandez & Shaw, 2013). They can be encouraged to actively engage at local, national, and global levels in raising awareness about the risks and impacts of climate change to you and people in general. They could have their involvement and participate in decision-making and policy-making related to climate change.

As to the level of awareness about problems related to climate change, the students are less informed about it. In a study conducted by the Natural Sciences Department of the university, more than 50% of the students are not aware of these problems.

In this paper, a Climate Change Environmental Advocacy Plan is presented to college students and relevant experts of a state-run university. They were asked to provide feedback for the plan's improvement. Final copy of the proposed plan may be used as reference or basis for similar advocacy needing it.

Objectives of the Climate Change Environmental Advocacy Campaign Plan

The advocacy plan aims to empower the youth through their awareness, involvement, and participation climate change mitigation. Specifically, the plan has the following objectives:

- a. Determine the level of awareness of college students on problems related to climate change
- b. To attain a heightened level of awareness of college students about problems related to climate change
- c. To enable college students to employ proactive measures or strategies in mitigating the effects of climate change
- d. To communicate strategies on climate change mitigation

The Key Messages on Climate Change Environmental Advocacy Campaign

Key messages are the main points of information one wants the audience to hear, understand, and remember. They are bite-sized summations that articulate what you do, why you do it, how you are different, and what value you bring to stakeholders. They are important because they clarify meaning and provide the takeaway headline of the issue one wants to communicate in the advocacy (NIDILRR grant 90DP0012-01-00). The proponent came up with the following key messages:

1. Climate change is real and we have to act now.
2. The youth should be properly educated on the scientific and research findings proving that climate change is happening at an unprecedented rate affecting many lives of people around the world. Being not cognizant of these facts will do nothing but exacerbate the effects of this phenomenon.
3. Universities are supposedly avenues where students develop higher-order critical thinking about the things happening around them and make sound responses thereafter. College organizations and clubs have the platform to raise awareness on various socio-political and environmental issues which cut across the curriculum.
4. Educating and empowering the youth to become agents of social change is something that every higher education institution should aspire to achieve.

Approach to the Environmental Advocacy Campaign

The proponent believes that the best format and channel to reach the target audience would be through *creation of a social media specifically Facebook (Fb) Page*. The campaign will have a title: Supporting an Initiative for the LOve for the eNvironment and the Next Generation or Project SILONG, a tagalog word which means “to take shelter with others” in English.

The students of the Pangasinan State University will be the target audience of the environmental advocacy campaign. Knowing the youth these days have social media accounts and based on the data provided by the Guidance and Admission office of the university, 92% of the students have social media (Fb) accounts. In a study *Use of Digital Advocacy* by German nonprofit foundations on Facebook (Burger, 2015), they investigated how German foundations make use of social media and especially Facebook to engage with the public and advocate for their topics. Facebook is used by all (100%) foundation in the sample, while Twitter was used by 41.9%, YouTube by 19.1%, and Google+ by at least 33 15.3% foundations. Foundations that are concerned with educational topics relied more on Facebook as the medium to get their message across, while foundations dealing with environmental topics tended to use Twitter nearly as much as Facebook.

All students with Facebook accounts will definitely have access to the format and type of materials that will be produced for the campaign. The proponent will tie up with Environment-related organizations to share and support the page so there will be wider reach and engagement of every published or shared information. The presidents of this organizations shall serve as co-administrators of the page, thus authorized to make posts. Posts and publication materials will directly delve on the plan’s key messages. Other activities such as podcast and webinars shall be conducted and to be streamed live in the page. The proponent plans on sponsoring contests like trivia and question and answer about climate change with some giveaways and prizes so there will be heightened engagements especially upon launch of the page.

Since the proponent is the former director of the university’s Publication and Public Relations and Information Office, she is confident that she has the experience, expertise, strategic thinking and technical know-how to produce the format and the type of my environmental advocacy campaign plan. Every week, there shall be planned and detailed posting to ensure that ideas are building up over time as followers and likers read or watch the materials featured.

The positive side of using Fb is that, it will no longer be so much of a problem reaching the target audience due to its ubiquity of use among youth, moreso the college students. The interest clubs and organizations have their own Fb pages as well so it will not be something unusual for the students to subscribe information from Fb pages. It is likewise very easy and fast to share information via Fb due to its inherent features and designs.

However, one disadvantage would be for those students who are residing from off grid areas like the indigenous people in the mountainous areas, island barangays. Since there is no internet connection, they are most likely at a disadvantaged situation in terms of receiving information from social media.

In this case, if the university will allow, other messaging apps available like Smart-Infocast shall be utilized to send SMS messages to these students as what was done during the time of pandemic so that they can still benefit from the useful information being disseminated and communicated in the campaign. Print information and educational materials shall be produced distributed to these students.

The Advocacy’s Message Treatment

Message treatment means the way a message is handled so that the information gets across the audience. It relates to the techniques or details of procedure or manner of performance, essential to effective presentation of the message clear, understandable and realistic to the audience.

It depends on a great extent on choice of the channel and the nature of audience. The task cannot be reduced to a formula or recipe. Treatment is a creative task that has to be tailor-made for each communication function. In the plan, message treatment takes into account the profile of the target audience specifically, age, and level of awareness on different environmental issues. Below are the core messages taken up in the plan:

1. Climate change is real. Scientists widely agree that climate change is occurring, primarily caused by humans, and is already having significant negative impacts, which are expected to worsen over the next century and beyond. Despite the recommendation that strong policy action is one of the most effective ways to address climate change, governments' response has been relatively limited.

2. Citizen mobilization calling for new climate mitigation and adaptation policies is believed to be a critical ingredient for motivating government action. In light of this, there is increasing attention to how climate change is covered in the media and how different types of climate messages may influence public perceptions and engagement on the issue.

3. The youth should be properly educated on the scientific and research findings proving that climate change is happening at an unprecedented rate affecting many lives of people around the world. Being not cognizant of these facts will do nothing but to exacerbate the effects of this phenomenon.

4. Universities are supposedly avenues where students develop higher order critical thinking about the things happening around them and making sound responses thereafter. College organizations and clubs have the platform to raise awareness on various socio-political and environmental issues which cut across the curriculum. Educating them and empowering them to become agents of social change is something that every higher education institution should aspire to achieve.

5. Social media plays a vital role in communicating information and strategies that will mitigate climate change. Organizations and advocacy groups are seen utilizing these platforms to spread awareness and concern on various socio-political causes. It was observed that this channel or form is easily accessible to the youth who are the target audience of environmental advocacy campaigns

6. Effective framing and messaging as well as productive of quality publication materials could get the attention and sustain the engagement of the youth.

7. Climate change is now considered crisis and the youth has to take its part in making this planet sustainable for the future generations. It is now more than ever that heightened awareness and participation of the youth is sought and to capitalize their energy, idealism and vigor.

Materials and methods

Choosing the target audience of the advocacy plan

The proponent chooses college students to be the key audience for the environmental advocacy campaign. It is known that students of this group, aging from 18-22 years more or less have the appropriate discernment about the world they live in particularly on environmental related issues like climate change. It is very surprising that despite their age, still a lot of them seem to be less mindful or cognizant of their roles as responsible stewards of the environment.

The target audience would be college students enrolled at Pangasinan State University, where the proponent works as Director for Student and Alumni Affairs. Majority of the students are coming from low income family with total combined annual family income of not more than Php300,000.00. Parents of their students are usually farmers and fisherfolks. It could be said, that their families are very much vulnerable to natural disasters or calamities, more so with climate change where farming and fishing activities are very much affected.

The students are mostly residents of Pangasinan and other nearby provinces like La Union, Tarlac and Zambales. In a recent survey conducted, some of our students are working jobs alongside their studies. University student population rose due to the pandemic.

All students are members of at least one organization in the university. Since one of the university's core values is environmental responsiveness, it will not be a challenge to encourage them to integrate environment-related activities in their plans. The proponent plans on meeting them to listen to their ideas on how they could be of help in the advocacy campaign. Various strategies such as contest on the best climate change campaign material and photography where each organization is invited to send their entry will also be conducted. Their main motivation or compelling reason in joining the campaign is to be able to be of help in solving the climate crisis in which their families are directly or indirectly impacted, economically wise.

Results and discussion

Pilot testing the environmental advocacy campaign plan and seeking expert review

The Environment Advocacy Campaign Plan (EACP) was presented to thirty-four (34) students of PSU Lingayen and six (6) non-teaching staff aging 22-26 who are considered youth and could still be target audience of the campaign. The students come from the different degree programs offered in the campus and also from different year levels. Their age ranges from 17-22 yrs old. They are enrolled in the current semester.

The proponent briefly explained the background of the project before the actual presentation of the plan. She also got feedback from them based on their answers to some questions pertaining to climate change phenomenon as well as the power of social media as source of useful information and as a vehicle for advocacy.

After the presentation of the plan, the students were asked to react or comment on it. Comments and suggestions were gathered and incorporated for the

improvement of the plan. At least 12 comments were listed below:

- A. Indicate that the research study to be utilized as a reference should be the latest
- B. Establish that Facebook, as a social media platform is best-fit for the advocacy campaign
- C. SILONG should be in the form of an acronym
- D. Include in the plan if it will be extended to the other campuses, and not just in Lingayen
- E. Indicate the specific roles of the following in relation to the campaign:
 - Supreme Student Council
 - Environmentalist Club as represented by the President
 - Federated Student Government
 - Department Chair of Environmental Science program (Binmaley Campus)
- F. What time will the promotional activities are done? See to it that it should be beyond class hours (5 PM)
- G. Who will be invited to the Podcast? How often will it be done?
- H. How do you ensure that crafting the action plan is well monitored if it is done online?
- I. Are you open to suggestions from students on what activities can be done for the page engagement to boost?
- J. There has to be co-admin who will help the proponent manage the page so that there will be more and sustained interactions
- K. How do you think the LGU will be convinced in listening and bringing your voice to a higher level?
- L. Would you like this concept of environmental advocacy campaign be replicated?

Expert Review

The proponent requested the three (3) experts to critique the environmental advocacy campaign plan in terms of its factualness, accuracy, timeliness, relevance, etc. The first expert is the Vice President for Academic Affairs, the second is the adviser of The Environmentalist Club of Lingayen Campus and the third if a social media expert who works at the Public Relations, Publication and Information Office of the university. Below are some of their comments on the above-mentioned parameters:

Expert	Comments			
	Factualness	Accuracy	Timeliness	Relevance
Expert No. 1	Related studies support the objectives of the campaign	Used most recent studies/references	The campaign is very timely	Highly relevant
Expert No. 2	Consistent with established facts	Very accurate	Very timely	Very much relevant
Expert No. 3	Supported by research	Science-based information are used	Very timely	Highly relevant
Rating based on 5-point Likert scale	13	14	15	15
Average Rating	14.25			

Review of literature

Pandve *et al.* (2009) underscored that youth play a crucial role in combating climate change. They have the skills of spreading new habits and technologies that contribute to mitigating the effects of climate change (Ki-moon, 2008 in Pandve *et al.*, 2009). United Nations International Strategy for Disaster Reduction, UNISDR (2000) specifies that youth can help in the successful implementation of disaster prevention and risk management strategies because they can promote the necessary change in behaviors and a shift in mentalities. This is possible because they are adaptable as well as able to quickly make low-carbon lifestyles and career choices (Pandve *et al.*, 2009). Further, they can share and apply what they learned especially within their households, families, and the wider community (Shaw *et al.* 2009) through various platforms and channels like the social media. In essence, the youth can easily and actively support the government’s initiatives that could lead to the formulation of far-reaching solutions (Pandve *et al.*, 2009).

Social media is used in sharing information; there is no shortage of thoughts and ideas shared online every second of the day. Social media is a great avenue to let people express themselves in a wider scope of audience. There are news outlets that cannot cover all issues globally and locally but social media can. Social media has left and right resources for sharing news about typhoons, landslide, and any natural occurrences even the fast rising of the sea level (Puentes, 2021).

Barreda (2015) found that the younger students emphasize the role of mass media, family, trainings, and seminars in influencing their awareness while the older students are more likely to be influenced by the information from the Internet and education. This is possibly due to the exposure of older students to both educational content knowledge of the issue and the use of internet as part of their academic as well as extracurricular activities. As Lineman *et al.* (2015) reported, increasing awareness of climate change relates to the exposure in social media networks.

He also found the role of universities to improve or enhance the awareness level of students on climate change. There appears a progression on the perceived factors that are important in improving youth’s awareness on climate change, i.e. from personal experience to education to government programs. Devkota and Phuyal (2017) emphasize the important role of universities in enhancing youth awareness of climate change, and the role of university policies, programs, and projects in increasing the level of understanding of climate change impacts and risks. They also reported the importance of the use of information education campaign materials as reference materials that could improve students’ level of awareness.

Furthermore, social media is one of the fastest venues to advocate or share relevant issues with a wide variety of interests. It can be used by organizations in rebranding or developing their image, they could also increase the involvement of the audience in their advocacies (Roshandel *et.al*, 2016).

Utilizing social media can make a clear difference now. Social media has the capacity to act as a bullhorn and tallying system to make people see the vast change or help the environment needs. The badly deteriorating environment has received better attention in the last ten years. Some changed their lifestyle and behaviors to be more environmentally friendly even big corporations did some changes in their materials.

Greenberg (2013) found that social media have an optimistic impact on the learning of youth, usage of social media to get information about global issues, for instance, as climate change, and makes greater concern about global climate change. He also found that those who did not use social media became more disconnected in their perception of climate change. According to the findings of Piccolo & Alani (2015) social media platforms, such as Twitter where users upload climate change information as they claimed there were many encouraging tools in social media to promote the climate change issue, and had also seen the promotion of climate change related movements and campaigns (Piccolo & Alani, 2015).

For instance, the use of palm oil by Nestle in its Kit Kat bars was brought to light a few years ago when Greenpeace started to raise awareness of the issue. Businesses that destroyed Indonesian rainforests produced palm oil. Greenpeace might have attempted to alter this by suing corporate lawyers without the use of social media. Without the general public from social media ever learning much about the case, they might have lost. Instead, they began promoting the hashtag # kitkat, which quickly became popular on Twitter. People circulated the story so quickly and to such a large audience that it was eventually covered by mainstream media. They covered the story and even criticized Nestle for its social media response. Social media enabled individuals to unite and effect change, with Nestle committing to solely using palm oil from plantations by 2015 (Folk, 2022)

There were 15 climate-related disasters in 2019 that cost \$124.1 billion to repair. These include catastrophes like the California wildfires, the

typhoons that hit the coasts of China and Japan, and the catastrophic floods that occurred in Australia and Spain. Large areas in the arctic circle are at risk due to the increased amount of permafrost that has thawed as a result of increased temperatures, which could accelerate climate change by releasing methane gas. In light of this, climate-related themes like ClimateStrike and Typhoon are listed among the top 10 global trending topics on Twitter in 2019.

In addition to growing in popularity on social media, climate change-related content has also begun to appear in the entertainment industry. Examples include HBO's "Years on Years," "Ice on Fire," and even a CNN Special Town Hall on Climate Change. This described situations in which a string of dreadful events, such as natural disasters caused by the climate, occurred. People from all around the world create and spread a message that is more inclusive and aimed at larger audiences. Greta's speech and the worldwide climate strike are two examples of messages that have been amplified throughout the world. Both incidents result in online viral material. Google Trend shows a peak in searches for "Climate Strike," "Greta's Speech," and "Climate Change" between September 20 and September 28, 2019.

Nowadays, it's difficult to picture life without Facebook, Twitter, or any other social media platforms, but we must keep in mind that they also have an impact on the environment. According to a study from Oxford University, followers' pro-environmental behavior increased on average by 0.14% for every 1000 tweets or likes they received on a post addressing climate change. This indicates that if you tweet once a day for 30 days on climate change, 14 individuals will become more environmentally aware as a result of your messaging! Although it may not seem like much at first, this has a significant influence.

Summary

Feedbacks were gathered from the students and employees who were subjected to pilot testing the plan. Comments/ suggestions were noted which are

about the content, schedule, clarification on the project title SILONG which were incorporated in the plan. Meanwhile the experts provided very acceptable evaluation of the plan in terms of factualness, accuracy, timeliness and relevance with an average rating of 14.25.

Conclusion and recommendation

The plan is fit and relevant to be used for climate change advocacy campaign in a state- university setting. The plan may be used as reference or guide for other advocates who wish to pursue climate change mitigation advocacy. It is recommended that for others who will use this plan may consider pilot testing it with bigger number of respondents.

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