

A Systematic Literature Review on Participatory Communication: Implications for Social Change and Sustainability in China

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To Link this Article: <http://dx.doi.org/10.6007/IJARBSS/v15-i1/24420>

DOI:10.6007/IJARBSS/v15-i1/24420

Published Date: 28 January 2025

Abstract

This systematic literature review explores the role of participatory communication in promoting social change and advancing sustainable development in the Chinese context. Participatory communication is rooted in Freire's dialogic pedagogy and UNESCO's participatory framework, emphasizing two-way dialogue, empowerment, and collaboration. The review organizes the findings into two frameworks: participatory communication as a tool for social change and citizen engagement, and as a problem-solving mechanism for

sustainable development. In the Chinese context, the review highlights the transformative potential of digital platforms such as WeChat and Douyin to enable marginalized communities to participate in governance and environmental protection. The analysis identifies key research gaps, including a lack of attention to marginalized populations, limited longitudinal research, and challenges posed by digital inequality. The findings provide theoretical and practical insights into the adaptability and impact of participatory communication and suggest future research directions to address socio-environmental challenges in a rapidly evolving media environment.

Keywords: Participatory Communication, Social Change, Civic Engagement, Problem-Solving, Sustainable Development

Introduction

Background and Evolution of Participatory Communication

Participatory communication has emerged as a cornerstone framework in development communication, addressing the limitations of earlier top-down models such as modernization and dependency theories (Servaes & Malikhao, 2008). Rooted in Freire's dialogical pedagogy (1970) and UNESCO's participatory debates in the 1970s, this approach emphasizes two-way communication, empowerment, and collaboration. By involving communities directly in decision-making processes, participatory communication supports their active role in addressing societal challenges (Cadiz, 2005; Tufte & Mefalopulos, 2009).

Globally, participatory communication has evolved from a theoretical paradigm to a practical framework, adapting to diverse sociopolitical contexts. Its principles have been widely applied in initiatives aimed at fostering social change (e.g., civic engagement, community empowerment) and promoting sustainable development (e.g., environmental protection, poverty alleviation) (Van de Fliert, 2010). In the digital age, platforms like social media have further democratized information exchange, enabling marginalized groups to participate in public discourse and influence decision-making processes.

Significance of Participatory Communication in the Chinese Context

China's unique sociopolitical and digital landscape provides a rich environment for exploring participatory communication. National policies such as rural revitalization, poverty alleviation, and environmental governance emphasize grassroots participation and community-driven decision-making, which align closely with participatory communication principles (Guo & Chan, 2020). Digital platforms like Douyin and WeChat have played pivotal roles in empowering rural populations and promoting civic engagement, enabling more inclusive and localized communication processes (Yang & Jiang, 2015).

However, participatory communication in China remains underexplored, particularly in the contexts of media practices and development communication. Historically dominated by top-down governance structures, the Chinese context offers a valuable case study for understanding how participatory communication frameworks can integrate bottom-up civic participation with state-led initiatives. This study aims to examine how participatory communication contributes to fostering social change and sustainability in this rapidly evolving sociopolitical landscape.

Objectives of the Systematic Literature Review

The main objective of this systematic review is to critically analyze the existing body of literature on participatory communication in the Chinese context, with a specific focus on its contributions to social change and sustainability. This review aims to:

a. Categorize and quantify participatory communication research under different theoretical frameworks:

Identify and classify research focusing on participatory communication's theoretical underpinnings, including its role in social change (e.g., civic engagement and empowerment) and problem-solving for sustainable development (e.g., poverty alleviation and environmental conservation).

b. Conduct a cluster analysis of localized practices:

Examine how participatory communication frameworks are applied in the Chinese context, exploring characteristics of localized practices such as community governance, digital platform usage, and environmental conservation.

c. Identify research gaps and propose future directions:

Highlight gaps in existing literature, such as insufficient attention to marginalized populations, limited longitudinal studies, and underexplored cultural contexts, while proposing new directions for advancing participatory communication theory and its practical applications.

By achieving these objectives, this review will enhance our understanding of participatory communication's dual role as a theoretical framework and a practical tool for addressing complex social and environmental challenges in China's rapidly evolving media landscape.

Methodology

Research Strategy

The reporting of this systematic review adheres to the standards set forth by the Preferred Reporting Items for Systematic Reviews and Meta-Analyses (PRISMA) Statement (Sarkis-Onofre et al., 2021). The PRISMA 2020 statement provides updated guidelines reflecting recent advances in methodologies for identifying, selecting, appraising, and synthesizing research studies (Page et al., 2021).

A comprehensive literature search was conducted using the CKNI and CKNI SCHOLAR databases. The search covered the available timeline of the databases, from 2007 to 2024. The search strategy employed the Chinese term "(participatory communication)" and the English term "(participatory communication) AND (in China)," utilizing Boolean operators to refine the search results. No initial restrictions were applied in terms of language or document type. Duplicates were identified and removed using EndNote software, ensuring the accuracy of the dataset. The detailed PRISMA flow diagram illustrating the search and selection process is presented in Figure 1.

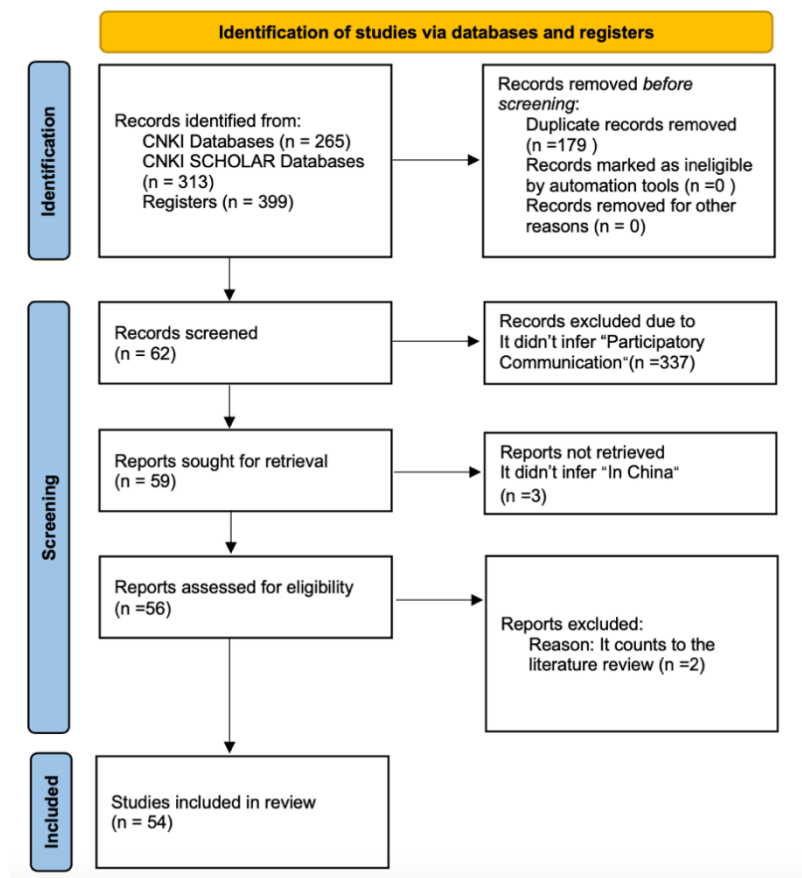


Figure 1 PRISMA flow diagram depicting the study selection process

Data Selection and Extraction

The data selection and extraction process strictly adhered to the PRISMA guidelines, ensuring both transparency and replicability throughout the review (Page et al., 2021). Initially, a comprehensive search yielded 399 records from the selected databases. After removing duplicates and filtering out ineligible records, a total of 62 studies were identified for further screening. The inclusion criteria were as follows: studies needed to focus on participatory communication within the context of Chinese media and communication; articles had to explicitly address theoretical frameworks or practical applications of participatory communication; and studies were required to be empirical in nature and published in peer-reviewed journals.

The exclusion criteria applied were: non-empirical works, including editorials, commentaries, and reviews; and studies that did not directly engage with the concept of participatory communication or were not specific to the Chinese context.

Following the initial screening, 59 reports were retrieved, of which three were excluded due to their lack of relevance to the Chinese context. 56 studies passed the eligibility assessment, and two studies were excluded because they were literature reviews rather than empirical studies. Finally, 54 studies were included in the analysis. The PRISMA flow chart in Figure 1 presents this process step by step.

Data Analysis and Classification

Many scholars have classified and discussed the theoretical framework of participatory communication according to its application context and objectives. Tufté and Mefalopulos (2009) emphasized that the classification of participatory communication should consider its role in media participation, strategic communication and problem-solving. Therefore, this study draws on the above literature and divides the application of participatory communication into two main categories to reflect the actual application in different theoretical contexts.

First, Participatory Communication as a Framework for Social Change and Civic Engagement includes research that investigates how participatory communication is utilized to build communication strategies aimed at fostering social development and civic engagement. This category draws on the work of Servaes (1999), who proposed that participatory communication is an important tool for empowering marginalized communities, enabling them to participate in decision-making processes that directly affect their lives. In addition, Gumucio-Dagron and Tufté (2006) expanded this classification to include citizen participation and governance. Participatory communication strengthens dialogue between citizens and government institutions, promoting transparency, accountability, and community-driven governance. What needs to be emphasized is the transformative potential of communication in achieving social change and building inclusive communities. This category includes studies that explore participatory communication's role in empowering marginalized groups, enhancing civic engagement, and fostering inclusive governance. For example: studies analyzing how platforms like *Douyin and WeChat bridge urban-rural divides, amplify marginalized voices and strengthen citizen-government dialogue* (Yang & Jiang, 2015; Bai, 2020).

Second, Participatory Communication as a Framework for Problem-Solving and Sustainable Development encompasses studies that explore the role of participatory communication in addressing societal issues, including conflict resolution and environmental sustainability. White (1994) categorized participatory communication as an essential framework for mediating conflicts and building community consensus through dialogue and collaboration. This problem-solving approach was further extended by Cox and Pezzullo (2016), who focused on the application of participatory communication in multi-faceted environmental decision-making processes, where communities engage in sustainable development practices and develop a sense of shared responsibility for socio-environmental stewardship. This category examines how participatory communication facilitates societal problem-solving, such as conflict resolution and environmental sustainability. For example: *The three dimensions of intangible cultural heritage protection: inheritance protection, innovative development, and participatory dissemination* (Zhong & Mo, 2022).

Table 1

List of Review Studies

Category	Number of Studies
1.Participatory Communication as a Framework for Social Change and Civic Engagement	36
2.Participatory Communication as a Framework for Problem-Solving and Sustainable Development	18
Total	54

This structured classification comprehensively considers the various applications of participatory communication in different contexts, while highlighting its adaptability in addressing various social challenges. As shown in Table 1, by classifying the 54 selected studies into these two main frameworks, this study outlines the research trends of scholars when discussing the localized practices of participatory communication in different fields in the Chinese context.

Findings

The findings from the previous research on participatory communication between 2007 and 2024 are discussed based on the different frameworks in China.

Studies Focusing on Participatory Communication as a Framework for Social Change and Civic Engagement

Table 2

Participatory Communication as a Framework for Social Change and Civic Engagement (2007-2024)

Category	Number of Studies
Participatory Communication as a Framework for Social Change and Civic Engagement	36
Total	36

Participatory communication has played a significant role in fostering social change and enhancing civic engagement in China, particularly through its integration with digital platforms. Thirty-six studies in this review highlight its applications in empowering marginalized groups, facilitating governance, and bridging urban-rural divides.

Empowering Marginalized Groups through Digital Platforms

Digital platforms such as Douyin (TikTok's Chinese version) and WeChat have democratized information sharing, enabling previously excluded groups to contribute to public discourse. Bai (2020) and Sun (2020) demonstrate how these platforms empower individuals in rural or underserved areas to share their voices, challenging traditional, centralized media control. By lowering barriers to participation, these platforms have facilitated creative content production and fostered the active engagement of marginalized groups in shaping cultural and political narratives (Yi, 2022).

For instance, short video platforms have become key tools for bridging urban and rural divides. Bai (2020) shows how Douyin has enabled rural communities to share their

experiences and highlight local concerns, thus connecting them to broader societal conversations. This trend reflects the transformative potential of digital platforms as mechanisms for fostering dialogue and inclusion.

Strengthening Citizen Participation in Governance

Participatory communication has also been instrumental in enhancing community governance. Guan (2018) highlights how residents in rural areas, empowered through localized media platforms, have actively participated in governance and decision-making processes. Similarly, Wang and Cui (2019) document how participatory frameworks in university settings have fostered political involvement among students, enabling them to influence local policy decisions.

These findings demonstrate the practical applications of participatory communication beyond media theory, showcasing its role in empowering citizens and promoting transparency in governance. For example, rural revitalization initiatives have utilized participatory communication strategies to engage local populations in co-designing community development programs.

Bridging Marginalized Voices and Mainstream Media

The integration of digital platforms into participatory communication strategies has bridged the gap between marginalized voices and mainstream media, traditionally dominated by state narratives. Bai (2020) and Sun (2020) argue that digital platforms offer new pathways for civic engagement by connecting previously disconnected populations. Furthermore, Yi (2022) highlights how these platforms encourage creative expression, enabling individuals to shape cultural and political landscapes.

Studies Focusing on Participatory Communication as Framework for People Participation in Solving Problem

Participatory communication has proven to be a powerful framework for actively involving local populations in solving societal challenges. By empowering communities to take ownership of problem-solving processes, participatory communication fosters solutions that are tailored, relevant, and sustainable. This section examines how participatory communication facilitates community involvement, promotes sustainability-focused practices, and leverages media literacy and digital access as critical enablers of participation.

Table 3

Participatory Communication as a Framework for People Participation in Solving Problem (2007-2024)

Category	Number of Studies
Participatory Communication as a Framework for Problem-Solving and Sustainable Development	18
Total	18

Community Involvement in Problem-Solving

Community involvement is highlighted as a cornerstone of participatory communication frameworks. Wu (2016) and Zhang (2020) underscore that engaging local populations in

decision-making processes—whether in governance, poverty alleviation, or cultural preservation—ensures that solutions are directly informed by those most affected by the issues.

In the context of precision poverty alleviation, Wu (2016) highlights how participatory communication allows rural communities to co-design strategies that are adaptable to changing socioeconomic conditions. This approach not only enhances the relevance of the solutions but also builds community resilience by fostering a sense of ownership and accountability. Similarly, Zhang (2020) illustrates how localized participatory practices in rural governance empower communities to contribute actively to decision-making processes, ultimately promoting more inclusive governance structures.

These findings demonstrate that participatory communication's effectiveness stems from its ability to shift problem-solving authority to those directly impacted. By fostering collaborative decision-making and encouraging community-driven solutions, participatory communication enhances the adaptability and effectiveness of governance initiatives.

Sustainability-Focused Practices

Participatory communication also drives community-led initiatives in cultural preservation and environmental sustainability. These practices underscore the importance of localized, long-term solutions rooted in community engagement.

Su (2022) explores how participatory communication empowers local communities to protect intangible cultural heritage by involving them in the documentation, preservation, and transmission of traditional practices. This approach fosters cultural resilience by ensuring that preservation efforts are rooted in the lived experiences and priorities of local stakeholders. For example, community-led efforts to safeguard traditional crafts and oral traditions ensure their continuity across generations, embedding sustainability into cultural ecosystems.

In the context of environmental conservation, Zhong (2022) examines community-led initiatives such as afforestation programs and water resource management. These efforts demonstrate how participatory communication enables local populations to co-create sustainable solutions while cultivating a shared sense of responsibility for environmental stewardship. However, both Su (2022) and Zhong (2022) caution that much of the evidence supporting these initiatives is based on short- to medium-term outcomes, leaving the long-term sustainability of these solutions yet to be fully validated.

Media Literacy and Digital Access as Enablers

Media literacy and digital access are critical enablers of effective participatory communication frameworks, particularly in facilitating people's engagement in problem-solving processes. Zheng (2014) and Wu (2016) emphasize the importance of digital literacy in equipping marginalized populations—such as left-behind children and rural communities—with the tools needed to engage in social and political issues. By enhancing digital literacy, participatory communication facilitates broader access to public discourse and decision-making processes, allowing these groups to contribute more effectively to solving societal challenges. For instance, Zheng (2014) highlights how digital platforms, when paired with

adequate training, enable rural populations to amplify their voices in matters of local governance and environmental advocacy.

However, disparities in digital access and literacy levels continue to pose significant barriers, particularly for vulnerable populations. While platforms like Douyin and WeChat provide opportunities for broader participation, ensuring equitable access to these tools remains a critical challenge. Addressing these disparities is essential for ensuring that participatory communication fulfills its potential as an inclusive framework for problem-solving.

Conclusion

This systematic literature review systematically examined the theoretical foundations, localized practices, and research gaps in participatory communication, with a particular focus on its role in fostering social change and sustainable development within the Chinese context. By aligning with the three research objectives, this study provides a structured framework for understanding the theoretical underpinnings, practical applications, and future directions for participatory communication in both academic and practical domains.

Classification and Analysis of Theoretical Frameworks

Aligned with the first research objective, this study categorizes and analyzes the theoretical frameworks underpinning participatory communication within two primary dimensions: social change and problem-solving for sustainable development.

The social change framework emphasizes how participatory communication facilitates civic engagement and community empowerment. For instance, research demonstrates that marginalized groups can actively participate in localized governance practices and communicative interactions, thereby achieving increased political and social empowerment (Wang & Cui, 2019). This framework highlights the transformative potential of communication as an empowerment tool, reshaping relationships between the state and its citizens by promoting inclusivity and equity.

The problem-solving and sustainable development framework, on the other hand, explores how participatory communication supports cultural preservation and environmental governance. For example, community-driven participatory communication initiatives have demonstrated significant adaptability in co-designing and implementing solutions for poverty alleviation and environmental conservation (Zhong, 2022). These findings illustrate how participatory communication can serve as a dynamic and context-sensitive mechanism for addressing localized social challenges, enhancing resilience, and ensuring long-term sustainability.

By systematically classifying these theoretical frameworks, this study provides a robust analytical foundation for future research, offering a clearer lens through which participatory communication's applicability can be explored across diverse contexts.

Localized Practices in the Chinese Context

In line with the second research objective, this study investigates the localized practices of participatory communication within the unique socio-cultural and governance structures of China. Three primary areas of application are identified:

Community governance and local participation have emerged as central themes, with participatory communication enabling residents to engage in local decision-making processes. Guan (2018) highlights that community-driven communication practices have improved governance transparency and inclusivity by empowering residents to co-design policy initiatives. This bottom-up approach ensures that governance outcomes align more closely with local needs and priorities, fostering greater accountability and trust.

The role of digital platforms is another critical dimension. Platforms such as Douyin and WeChat have transformed the landscape of participatory communication, particularly by providing marginalized communities with spaces to amplify their voices and bridge the gap between local concerns and mainstream public discourses (Bai, 2020). These platforms democratize information sharing and reduce access barriers, creating opportunities for rural and disadvantaged groups to engage in broader societal discussions.

Environmental and cultural preservation has also been significantly influenced by participatory communication. For instance, Su (2022) demonstrates how community-driven initiatives to protect intangible cultural heritage foster cultural resilience and sustainability. Similarly, Zhong (2022) explores participatory frameworks in community-led environmental conservation, highlighting the potential for localized solutions to address pressing ecological challenges.

These findings illustrate how participatory communication, when adapted to the Chinese context, enables bottom-up governance, fosters cultural preservation, and drives localized environmental solutions. However, structural constraints, such as uneven access to digital platforms and regulatory limitations, remain significant challenges.

Research Gaps and Future Directions

Consistent with the third research objective, this review identifies several critical research gaps in the current body of literature.

First, there is insufficient attention to marginalized groups, such as first-generation migrants and ethnic minorities, who face significant barriers to digital participation (Zhou, 2020; Zhang, 2021). These populations remain underrepresented in participatory communication research, limiting the inclusivity and equity of the frameworks being studied.

Second, the lack of longitudinal research on participatory communication's long-term impact poses a significant limitation. Current studies primarily focus on short-term outcomes, leaving the sustainability and adaptability of community-driven solutions underexplored (Su, 2022; Zhong, 2022).

Third, digital inequality persists as a major challenge. Despite the potential of digital platforms to democratize participation, rural and underserved communities continue to face barriers in accessing these platforms due to insufficient infrastructure and inadequate digital literacy. This restricts the scalability and inclusivity of participatory communication practices.

Future research should prioritize longitudinal studies to assess the enduring impacts of participatory initiatives and explore the mechanisms through which these practices can be sustained over time. Additionally, targeted investments in digital infrastructure and education

are essential to bridge the digital divide, enabling greater participation by marginalized populations.

Theoretical and Contextual Significance

This study offers significant contributions to both the theoretical development and contextual application of participatory communication.

From a theoretical perspective, the study advances the discourse on participatory communication by systematically categorizing its dual roles in social change and sustainable development. By integrating the lens of political economy (Mosco, 2009) and media system dependency theory (Ball-Rokeach & DeFleur, 1976), this study demonstrates how participatory communication serves as both a methodological tool and a transformative framework. It moves beyond the traditional understanding of communication as a one-way information flow and repositions it as a multi-directional mechanism of empowerment, dialogue, and co-creation. Additionally, the study emphasizes the emerging role of digital platforms as enablers of participatory communication, providing marginalized groups with mechanisms to overcome spatial, cultural, and economic barriers.

In terms of contextual significance, this study provides a comprehensive analysis of how China's rapid modernization and unique governance structures shape participatory communication practices. The findings illustrate how participatory communication facilitates rural revitalization, enhances community governance, and strengthens cultural and environmental preservation efforts. For instance, digital platforms enable the integration of top-down policy frameworks with bottom-up participatory practices, creating a dynamic interface between state governance and community empowerment. Furthermore, the study highlights the challenges posed by regulatory frameworks and digital inequality, offering insights into how these constraints might be addressed to foster a more inclusive participatory ecosystem.

Finally, while this study focuses on China, its findings have broader implications for global contexts. The categorized theoretical frameworks and insights into localized practices can inform participatory communication research and practice in other developing countries facing similar challenges of modernization, inequality, and sustainability.

Acknowledgements

This work was supported by the 2021 Shaanxi Province New Liberal Arts Research and Reform Practice Project (Project No. 2021WKSJ002). The results presented in this paper are part of the phased achievements of the project.

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