



Sustainability Communication in Electric Mobility: The TVS iQube Dilemma

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Abstract: This teaching case examines the strategic and ethical challenge of communicating environmental sustainability in India's rapidly expanding electric two-wheeler market. Set within TVS Motor Company, the case centers on the TVS iQube and a decision faced by Visvanathan Sambasivam, recently appointed Head of Marketing Research, as he reviews a proposed campaign positioning the scooter as a symbol of "green mobility." The case unfolds at a moment when worsening urban air pollution, policy support for electric mobility, rising consumer environmental awareness, and periodic public concern over petrol dependence have strengthened the appeal of electric vehicles in India. Within this context, the iQube appears to offer a timely and persuasive sustainability narrative.

However, the case problematizes the simplicity of that narrative. While the TVS iQube produces zero tailpipe emissions and can credibly be presented as a cleaner urban mobility alternative, its broader environmental footprint remains more complex. The sustainability of electric mobility depends not only on vehicle use, but also on electricity generation, battery production, material extraction, disposal systems, and life-cycle impacts. This creates a central managerial dilemma: should TVS adopt a strong sustainability-led communication strategy to enhance market appeal and accelerate adoption, or should it pursue a more balanced and credible narrative that acknowledges environmental benefits without overstating them?

By situating this tension within a real organizational role and a nationally relevant product category, the case enables learners to critically examine how sustainability claims are framed, legitimized, and contested in practice. It is particularly suited for teaching environmental communication, sustainability marketing, strategic communication, and business ethics.

TVS iQube; sustainability communication; electric mobility; green marketing; green-washing

I.INTRODUCTION

The slide on the screen carried a bold promise: "The Future is Green."

Inside a conference room at TVS Motor Company, the marketing team sat waiting as the proposed campaign for the TVS iQube moved from one visual to the next—an electric scooter gliding through a clean, tree-lined city street, framed by open skies and an unmistakable message of sustainable urban mobility. The campaign was polished, timely, and emotionally persuasive. In a market increasingly drawn to electric mobility, the narrative seemed obvious.

But Visvanathan Sambasivam, recently appointed as Head of Marketing Research, did not respond immediately. He looked again at the tagline, then at the image of the iQube positioned as a symbol of a cleaner future. For many consumers, the logic was compelling. Indian cities were grappling with worsening air pollution, policymakers were pushing for electric mobility, and a new generation of urban commuters was becoming more conscious of environmental responsibility. At the same time, periodic public anxiety around fuel availability and rising dependence on petrol had further sharpened interest in alternative mobility solutions. In this context, the TVS iQube appeared to fit naturally into a story of progress—an electric alternative to the petrol-powered two-wheelers that had long dominated India's roads.

Yet Sambasivam knew that the environmental story was more complicated than the campaign suggested. The iQube produced zero tailpipe emissions, a meaningful advantage in polluted urban environments. But its broader environmental footprint extended beyond the road. Electricity generation in India remained uneven in its sustainability profile. Battery production involved material extraction and energy-intensive processes. Questions of battery disposal and lifecycle impact were becoming increasingly relevant in discussions of electric mobility. To present the iQube as an environmentally preferable product was valid; to portray it as an unquestionably "green" solution risked reducing a complex reality to a convenient slogan.

The team was waiting for his approval. If TVS leaned too heavily into the language of green mobility, it could strengthen its position in India's growing electric two-wheeler market and connect powerfully with environmentally conscious consumers. It might also resonate with those increasingly sensitive to the uncertainties of petrol dependence in war like situation. But if the company overstated the environmental promise of the product, it could undermine credibility, invite scepticism, and expose itself to accusations of simplification—or even greenwashing.

For Sambasivam, the decision was no longer about a campaign line. It was about whether a company could promote sustainability responsibly without overstating what sustainability actually meant. As the meeting continued, one question remained unresolved:

How should TVS Motor Company communicate the environmental sustainability of the TVS iQube in a way that is persuasive enough to drive adoption, yet credible enough to withstand scrutiny? The tension Sambasivam confronted in that meeting reflected a broader shift underway in India's mobility landscape, where electric vehicles were increasingly positioned not merely as technological alternatives, but as environmental solutions.

II. URBAN AIR POLLUTION AND THE RISE OF ELECTRIC MOBILITY IN INDIA

Over the past two decades, rapid urbanization, rising incomes, and expanding mobility needs have significantly transformed transportation patterns across India. Among all forms of personal transportation, two-wheelers have remained the most dominant. Scooters and motorcycles offer affordability, convenience, and flexibility, making them an essential part of everyday commuting for millions of people in both metropolitan and smaller urban centres.

However, the widespread use of conventional internal combustion engine vehicles has also contributed to growing concerns about urban air pollution. Transportation emissions are frequently identified as a major source of deteriorating air quality in Indian cities. Increasing levels of particulate matter, vehicular congestion, and public concern about environmental health have made urban mobility a subject of policy attention and public debate.

As a result, the transportation sector has become central to discussions about sustainability and cleaner development pathways. Policymakers, environmental advocates, and industry leaders have increasingly emphasized the need to reduce dependence on fossil-fuel-based mobility systems. In this context, electric vehicles (EVs) have emerged as a promising alternative.

Unlike conventional petrol-powered vehicles, electric vehicles produce no tailpipe emissions during operation, making them particularly attractive in densely populated urban areas where local air quality is already under stress. The idea of electric mobility therefore gained traction not only as a technological innovation but also as a visible symbol of environmental responsibility and future-oriented urban development.

Government initiatives further accelerated this shift. Policy support, consumer incentives, and public discourse around sustainable transportation created an environment in which electric mobility began to move from the margins toward the mainstream. In particular, electric two-wheelers became a strategically important category because of the scale of scooter and motorcycle usage in India's urban transport ecosystem.

For automotive manufacturers, the rise of electric mobility represented more than a product transition. It beckoned a deeper strategic shift, one that required companies to rethink not only vehicle design and technology, but also how they communicated value in a market increasingly shaped by environmental expectations.

III. TVS MOTOR COMPANY: LEGACY AND TRANSITION

TVS Motor Company has long been one of India's leading two-wheeler manufacturers, with a strong reputation for producing motorcycles, scooters, and three-wheelers for domestic and international markets. Over the years, the company built its brand on attributes such as reliability, performance, accessibility, and technological adaptation to the needs of Indian consumers.

Like other established players in the automotive sector, TVS operated for decades within a market defined largely by internal combustion engine vehicles. Its success depended on deep knowledge of commuter behaviour, fuel efficiency preferences, pricing sensitivities, and urban mobility patterns.

Yet as the mobility landscape began to evolve, so too did the strategic priorities of the company.

The global shift toward electrification, combined with India's growing policy and consumer interest in cleaner transportation, created pressure for legacy manufacturers to invest in the future of mobility. For TVS, entering the electric vehicle segment was not merely a matter of diversification. It was also a response to a changing market in which innovation, sustainability, and digital connectivity were becoming central to consumer expectations.

The transition posed multiple challenges. Electric vehicles required different technological capabilities, new supply chain considerations, evolving infrastructure dependencies, and fresh approaches to customer education. They also demanded a reconfiguration of brand communication. Traditional product attributes such as mileage, performance, and price remained important, but newer symbolic attributes—such as environmental responsibility and sustainable mobility—began to occupy a more visible role in the value proposition.

In this changing context, TVS's entry into electric mobility would need to do more than introduce a new product. It would need to position the company within a broader narrative about the future of transportation..

IV. THE TVS IQUBE: PRODUCT AND PROMISE

The TVS iQube emerged as the company's answer to the growing demand for electric urban mobility. Designed as an electric scooter for daily commuting, the iQube combined practical functionality with a contemporary image aligned with changing consumer lifestyles.

As an electric two-wheeler, the iQube offered several advantages that fit well with urban commuting needs. It was quieter than conventional petrol-powered scooters, required no petrol refueling, and was positioned as a technologically modern alternative for city riders. Its design and features reflected a shift in consumer expectations toward connected, intelligent, and convenient mobility solutions.

The scooter's environmental appeal was particularly significant. By producing zero tailpipe emissions, the iQube could be associated with cleaner streets, lower local air pollution, and a more responsible mode of personal transportation. In urban environments where air quality concerns had become increasingly visible, this made the product highly relevant to both policy narratives and consumer aspirations.

At the same time, the iQube was not simply a technical product; it was also a symbolic one. In the broader market, electric scooters increasingly represented more than just a means of travel. They were being linked to ideas of progress, modernity, sustainability, and responsible consumption. Consumers who purchased such vehicles were not only choosing a mode of transport; in many cases, they were also participating in a social and environmental narrative about cleaner living and smarter urban choices.

This symbolic dimension made communication especially important. The iQube was not just being sold on performance or convenience. It was also being positioned within a wider story about the future of mobility. Positioned as a modern electric scooter for urban commuters, the TVS iQube embodied both technological transition and symbolic environmental aspiration (see Exhibit 1).

Exhibit 1. TVS iQube in the Context of Urban Electric Mobility



TVS iQube as an electric two-wheeler positioned for urban commuting and cleaner mobility transitions in India.

V. THE SUSTAINABILITY NARRATIVE IN ELECTRIC MOBILITY

As electric vehicles gained popularity, sustainability became one of the most powerful narratives in automotive communication. Manufacturers, policymakers, and media platforms frequently described EVs as cleaner, greener, and more environmentally responsible alternatives to conventional vehicles.

Such framing was not without basis. Electric vehicles eliminated direct exhaust emissions, reduced local pollution at the point of use, and aligned with the growing global push toward decarbonization and energy transition. In densely populated urban environments, the visible and immediate benefit of zero tailpipe emissions was especially compelling.

However, the sustainability narrative surrounding electric mobility was also more complicated than it often appeared in marketing discourse.

The environmental performance of an electric vehicle extends beyond its operational use. The source of electricity used for charging affects overall emissions outcomes. In regions where power generation relies significantly on fossil fuels, the environmental benefits of EV adoption may differ from those in regions with higher renewable energy penetration. Similarly, battery production involves material extraction, energy-intensive manufacturing, and supply chain implications that are not visible to the end consumer. Questions of battery reuse, recycling, and disposal further complicate the lifecycle story. These realities did not invalidate the environmental benefits of electric mobility. Rather, they made those benefits conditional, contextual, and multidimensional.

For companies, this created a communication dilemma. Should electric vehicles be marketed primarily through clear, aspirational, and emotionally resonant sustainability messages that support adoption? Or should companies adopt a more nuanced communication strategy that acknowledges environmental complexity, even at the risk of reducing the simplicity and persuasive force of the message?

The answer was not obvious.

In a competitive market, strong sustainability messaging could create differentiation and align with consumer values. Yet overly simplified environmental claims could trigger skepticism, especially in a context where stakeholders were becoming more aware of greenwashing and the selective use of environmental narratives.

VI. THE ROLE OF MARKETING RESEARCH IN SUSTAINABILITY COMMUNICATION

In 2024, Visvanathan Sambasivan joined TVS Motor Company as Head of Marketing Research. His appointment came at a time when electric mobility was becoming an increasingly important part of the company's strategic portfolio.

His role extended beyond conventional market analysis. As Head of Marketing Research, Sambasivan was responsible for understanding consumer behavior, tracking evolving perceptions, and generating insights that could inform product positioning and communication decisions. In the case of the iQube, this meant examining not only how consumers perceived electric scooters, but also how they interpreted the language of sustainability attached to them.

This role became especially important in the electric mobility segment, where consumer adoption was shaped by both functional and symbolic considerations. Consumers evaluated factors such as price, range, convenience, and performance, but they also responded to broader meanings—innovation, modernity, and environmental responsibility.

Marketing research in such a context involved more than measuring preferences. It required anticipating how claims might be received, where enthusiasm might turn into skepticism, and how public expectations around sustainability could evolve over time.

Sambasivan understood that environmental messaging could be highly effective in influencing perception and adoption. But he also understood that sustainability claims were increasingly scrutinized by consumers, regulators, journalists, and civil society actors. A message that appeared inspiring to one audience could appear exaggerated to another.

His task, therefore, was not simply to support a campaign. It was to help determine how far the company could go in building an environmental narrative without compromising trust.

VII. THE CAMPAIGN REVIEW

The campaign under review reflected many of the dominant themes in electric mobility marketing. It featured clean urban imagery, emotionally positive storytelling, and language that associated the iQube with a future of sustainable commuting. The creative team believed the campaign effectively captured the zeitgeist of a market in transition.

From a commercial standpoint, the strategy made sense.

The electric two-wheeler segment was becoming increasingly competitive. Consumers were being introduced to multiple EV options, and brand differentiation mattered. Sustainability was not merely an add-on; it was becoming central to how electric vehicles were understood and valued. A compelling environmental narrative could strengthen the product's relevance, deepen consumer identification, and position the iQube as more than a utilitarian scooter.

At the same time, the campaign's strength was also its vulnerability.

The use of strong green symbolism—lush urban landscapes, references to cleaner futures, and simplified sustainability language—risked suggesting a degree of environmental certainty that the product's full lifecycle could not completely support. While the iQube clearly reduced local tailpipe emissions, the broader environmental context was less straightforward.

Sambasivan recognized that the issue was not whether the iQube had environmental value. It clearly did. The issue was how that value should be framed.

Could the company justifiably use emotionally persuasive green narratives to encourage electric adoption, knowing that some environmental trade-offs remained outside the consumer's immediate view? Or should it adopt a more balanced communication approach that introduced nuance, evidence, or qualification—at the risk of weakening the clarity and appeal of the message?

The campaign review became a point at which branding, ethics, competition, and sustainability converged.

VIII. THE COMMUNICATION DILEMMA

The dilemma before Sambasivan was not simply whether to approve a campaign. It was whether to define the terms of sustainability for the company's electric mobility narrative.

If TVS chose to emphasize the iQube primarily as a "green" or "clean" solution, the company could align itself strongly with public sentiment, government priorities, and the symbolic promise of electric mobility. This approach had strategic advantages. It could help accelerate consumer adoption, strengthen brand differentiation, and position TVS as a forward-looking participant in India's sustainable mobility transition.

However, such a strategy also carried risks.

If the sustainability message appeared too absolute, too generalized, or too detached from lifecycle realities, it could invite criticism. Stakeholders might question whether the company was emphasizing only the most visible benefits while omitting less visible environmental trade-offs. In an era of increasing scrutiny around corporate environmental claims, this could damage trust and expose the company to accusations of oversimplification or greenwashing.

Alternatively, TVS could choose a more measured communication strategy—one that foregrounded the genuine benefits of the iQube while framing them in a more contextual and carefully qualified manner. This approach might strengthen transparency and credibility, especially among more informed stakeholders. Yet it also posed a commercial challenge. Nuanced messages are often harder to communicate in mass marketing formats. They may be less emotionally compelling, less memorable, and less effective in fast-moving consumer markets.

The dilemma, therefore, was not between truth and falsehood.

It was between different legitimate ways of communicating an environmentally preferable product, each with distinct strategic and ethical implications.

IX. A BROADER ORGANIZATIONAL QUESTION

As Sambasivam reflected on the decision, he realized that the issue extended beyond a single campaign or a single scooter model.

The company's communication choices could shape how consumers understood not only the iQube, but electric mobility more broadly. If the company framed EVs as uncomplicated environmental solutions, it could reinforce optimistic public narratives and potentially support faster adoption. If it adopted a more cautious and evidence-based approach, it could contribute to a more mature and credible conversation about sustainability—but perhaps at the cost of reduced persuasive force in a highly competitive market.

The challenge was especially significant because the electric vehicle category occupied a unique space between technological innovation and moral aspiration. Consumers were not merely buying transport. They were buying into an idea—of cleaner cities, modern living, and responsible consumption.

This made sustainability communication both powerful and fragile.

A strong narrative could mobilize demand and build brand meaning. But if the narrative outpaced reality, the gap between promise and performance could erode trust over time.

For TVS Motor Company, the decision was therefore as much about long-term legitimacy as it was about short-term marketing effectiveness.

X. THE DECISION POINT

The meeting was nearing its end.

The campaign team looked toward Sambasivam, waiting for direction. The slides remained on the screen—visually compelling, strategically attractive, and clearly aligned with the momentum of India's electric mobility transition. Yet the simplicity of the message still troubled him.

He could ask the team to proceed with the aspirational sustainability framing, trusting that the broader environmental benefit of electric mobility justified a strong and emotionally resonant narrative. He could ask for a revised version that retained the positive environmental positioning but softened the absolutist language. Or he could push for a more evidence-based communication approach, one that acknowledged environmental benefits while avoiding the temptation to present the product as an unquestioned symbol of green mobility.

Each path carried consequences.

A stronger sustainability claim might improve market impact. A more balanced message might improve credibility. A more cautious message might reduce both risk and resonance.

There was no obvious answer.

As he prepared to respond, one central question remained:

How should TVS Motor Company communicate the environmental sustainability of the TVS iQube in a way that is persuasive enough to drive adoption, yet credible enough to withstand scrutiny?

XI. DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. How should TVS Motor Company frame the environmental sustainability of the TVS iQube in its marketing communication?
2. What are the risks of using strong aspirational green narratives in electric vehicle promotion?
3. How can companies balance persuasive sustainability messaging with transparency and credibility?
4. Should TVS emphasize zero tailpipe emissions as the central environmental claim, or should it adopt a more qualified lifecycle-based narrative?
5. What role do stakeholders—consumers, policymakers, regulators, and environmental groups—play in shaping how sustainability should be communicated in the electric mobility sector?

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