

Analysing Negative Campaigns Against Palm Oil

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ABSTRACT

The palm oil industry has increasingly become the target of sustained negative campaigns launched by environmental NGOs, international media, and policy actors in the Global North. These campaigns often frame palm oil as a major driver of tropical deforestation, biodiversity loss, and human rights violations. While some concerns may be grounded in evidence, dominant narratives tend to simplify complex realities and overlook the socio-economic importance of palm oil in producing countries such as Indonesia and Malaysia. This article conducts a qualitative literature review of 60 peer-reviewed sources published between 2015 and 2024. Using a thematic and interpretive approach, supported by discourse analysis, the study examines how anti-palm oil narratives are constructed, framed, and disseminated. It identifies key actors, campaign strategies, and the role of media channels in shaping public perception. The review also highlights counter-narratives promoted by producing countries and stakeholders through mechanisms such as RSPO and ISPO certification. The findings reveal that many negative campaigns are influenced by geopolitical interests and trade competition, leading to power asymmetries in global sustainability discourse. This review concludes that current debates on palm oil require more balanced, inclusive, and evidence-based perspectives that consider environmental concerns alongside economic and social dimensions in the Global South.

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Introduction

The global palm oil industry has become a focal point of international environmental and trade debates due to increasing concerns over its unfairly alleged role in deforestation, biodiversity loss, and human rights violations. Over the past two decades, these concerns have triggered intense campaigns—primarily driven by Western-based environmental NGOs, media outlets, and policymakers—portraying palm oil as a major ecological threat. These negative campaigns have played a significant role in shaping consumer perceptions, legislative frameworks, and purchasing behavior, particularly in the European Union and North America. While environmental degradation linked to unsustainable palm oil production is indeed a pressing issue, dominant narratives often disregard the complex socio-economic realities in major producing countries such as Indonesia and Malaysia [1].

Palm oil remains the most efficient oil crop in terms of yield per hectare and supports the livelihoods of over 4.5 million people in Indonesia alone, many of whom are smallholder farmers. Nonetheless, negative campaigns have frequently generalized the industry as uniformly harmful, leading to trade barriers and restrictive labeling policies that disproportionately impact Global South producers. Furthermore, selective advocacy within these campaigns has been criticized for neglecting the environmental costs of alternative vegetable oils, which often require more land and water to produce. This selective framing reflects deeper asymmetries in global discourse, where powerful actors from the Global North dominate sustainability standards and communication platforms, marginalizing Southern perspectives [2,3].

Numerous studies have explored the ideological and political dimensions of these campaigns. It has been demonstrated that Western NGOs frequently portray palm oil as an emblem of environmental injustice, overlooking local economic dependencies. Similarly, it has been underscored how media framing determines the resonance and policy uptake of environmental campaigns. It is further argued that EU regulatory frameworks, influenced by public environmental concerns, have led to trade disputes and diplomatic tensions with palm oil-exporting nations. It critically examined the Roundtable on Sustainable Palm Oil (RSPO), contending that its design is predominantly shaped by Northern interests rather than inclusive global governance. In contrast, it has been highlighted counter-efforts by palm oil-producing countries, such as Malaysia, which have launched diplomatic narratives and public information campaigns to resist stigmatization and protect their development sovereignty. More recently, it has been emphasized the need for balanced representations in global media and policy platforms, urging for the integration of scientific evidence with indigenous and local knowledge [4-9].

Despite a growing body of scholarship on the subject, few studies have provided a holistic synthesis of how anti-palm oil narratives are constructed, politicized, and contested across various platforms. Existing research often isolates the environmental dimension from broader geopolitical, economic, and media frameworks. Addressing this gap, the present study adopts a qualitative literature review approach, analyzing 60 peer-reviewed academic sources published between 2015 and 2024. This review aims to unpack the strategic discourses, actor motivations, and framing techniques embedded in negative palm oil campaigns, while also identifying how producing countries and industry stakeholders are developing counter-narratives. Ultimately, the study seeks to promote a more inclusive, evidence-based, and

balanced global dialogue on palm oil by offering recommendations for equitable sustainability governance and improved transnational communication strategies.

Literature Review

Framing in international media has played a central role in shaping negative perceptions of palm oil, particularly by associating the commodity with deforestation, biodiversity loss, and human rights violations. Numerous studies have demonstrated how Western media narratives often portray palm oil as an inherently destructive crop, neglecting the complex socio-economic realities in producing countries. For instance, it has been found that media coverage in Europe heavily emphasized environmental destruction while omitting the role of palm oil in rural livelihoods and national development in Southeast Asia. It has been argued that NGOs and environmental campaigns in the Global North utilize emotive visual narratives to simplify and moralize palm oil issues, reinforcing dichotomies of “good” consumers versus “bad” producers. In a comparative discourse analysis, it has been shown how negative framing persists even when sustainability certifications such as RSPO are implemented, indicating a structural bias in media representation. These framings not only affect consumer attitudes but also influence policymaking in the European Union, which has moved toward restrictions on palm oil-based biofuels [10-12].

While media narratives largely shape the symbolic landscape of palm oil, a growing body of literature suggests that these campaigns are also driven by underlying geopolitical and economic interests. Scholars argue that negative portrayals are not merely the result of environmental concern but often reflect efforts to safeguard domestic agricultural markets in developed countries. The European Union’s restrictive stance on palm oil imports coincides with its strong subsidies for domestic oilseed crops such as rapeseed and sunflower, raising questions about protectionism disguised as sustainability. It has been analyzed that the EU’s Renewable Energy Directive II (RED II) and concluded that its classification of palm oil as a high-risk feedstock was influenced more by trade politics than scientific consensus. It is further emphasized that trade disputes between the EU and Indonesia–Malaysia over palm oil tariffs are often masked by sustainability rhetoric, enabling powerful economies to reshape trade rules in their favor. These findings highlight the importance of analyzing negative campaigns through a critical lens that includes power dynamics and global market interests [13-15].

In response to these external campaigns and trade policies, palm oil-producing countries such as Indonesia and Malaysia have intensified diplomatic efforts and public relations strategies to counter the negative narratives. These producer nations argue that the sustainability discourse promoted by Western actors often lacks fairness and fails to acknowledge improvements made through domestic regulations and voluntary certification schemes. For example, the Indonesian Sustainable Palm Oil (ISPO) and the Malaysian Sustainable Palm Oil (MSPO) schemes were developed to demonstrate national commitment to responsible production practices. Both governments have also taken legal action at the World Trade Organization (WTO) against the European Union’s discriminatory trade measures, underscoring the geopolitical tension underlying sustainability claims. Furthermore, producing countries have launched international campaigns, including “Palm Oil Facts” and social media movements, to reframe palm oil as a vital economic driver rather than an ecological villain. While these strategies seek to rebalance global narratives, scholars note that asymmetrical power relations in international discourse often limit

the effectiveness of such counter-campaigns, raising questions about who gets to define sustainability on the global stage [16-19].

In addition to state-level actions, non-governmental organizations (NGOs) have played a pivotal role in amplifying negative campaigns against palm oil, often acting as transnational actors that bridge grassroots environmental concerns with global policy agendas. Several prominent NGOs have launched sustained campaigns that link palm oil production to deforestation, habitat destruction, and carbon emissions, using emotionally charged imagery and storytelling to gain public support. These organizations have successfully pressured multinational corporations to adopt zero-deforestation commitments and exclude contentious supply chains, further legitimizing negative narratives in the global market. However, scholars have pointed out that while these campaigns are effective in raising awareness, they often lack contextual nuance and disproportionately target smallholder producers in the Global South. For instance, it has been observed that anti-palm oil campaigns rarely account for socio-economic dependencies in producer countries, leading to unintended consequences such as livelihood threats and marginalization of rural communities. Furthermore, NGO-driven certification schemes like RSPO, while promoting sustainability standards, have also been criticized for perpetuating Western-centric norms that may not align with local realities, highlighting the need for more inclusive frameworks in environmental governance [20-24].

Equally influential in shaping global perceptions of palm oil is the international media, which has frequently employed selective framing that emphasizes environmental destruction while overlooking socio-economic contributions in producing countries. Major news outlets and documentary producers have consistently highlighted images of deforestation, endangered species, and forest fires associated with palm oil plantations, often omitting the broader development context or the distinction between industrial estates and smallholder plots. The repetition of such frames has contributed to a cognitive association between palm oil and ecological harm in the minds of global consumers, reinforcing calls for boycotts and policy bans. Scholars argue that this media framing is not purely informational, but also ideological, driven by underlying political and economic interests that align with competing oilseed industries, particularly in the Global North. Moreover, comparative framing that contrasts palm oil with ‘cleaner’ oils such as sunflower or rapeseed often ignores their own land-use footprints and water consumption, revealing a double standard in environmental reporting. These biased portrayals, while raising awareness, may inadvertently perpetuate environmental colonialism—where sustainability narratives are imposed from the outside without sufficient engagement with local contexts and voices [25-27].

While sustainability certifications such as the Roundtable on Sustainable Palm Oil (RSPO) and the Indonesian Sustainable Palm Oil (ISPO) scheme were developed to improve environmental and social practices within the palm oil industry, their global reception has been marred by perceptions of bias and double standards. Western stakeholders frequently critique national-level certification schemes like ISPO as insufficiently rigorous, favoring instead RSPO or even more restrictive private certification standards promoted by multinational retailers and NGOs. However, such preferences often ignore the socio-political realities of producer countries, where the implementation of Western-centric standards can marginalize smallholders who lack the capacity to comply with costly certification processes. Moreover, studies have found

that some European and North American supply chain actors use sustainability standards selectively—emphasizing them when aligned with their branding interests but relaxing enforcement when faced with cost pressures or geopolitical concerns. These inconsistencies contribute to skepticism in producing countries, where certification is perceived not merely as an environmental mechanism but as a tool for market control and trade protectionism. The resulting asymmetry in how different oils are evaluated—palm oil facing strict scrutiny while soybean or rapeseed oil receive less critical attention—further reinforces the notion that sustainability discourse is often shaped by power dynamics rather than objective environmental criteria [28,29].

Media representations and international policy discourses play a pivotal role in shaping global perceptions of palm oil. The media often functions not only as an information conduit but also as an actor influencing policymaking through framing and agenda-setting. In this context, negative portrayals of palm oil are amplified by transnational environmental campaigns, which tend to emphasize deforestation and biodiversity loss while downplaying efforts by producing countries to implement sustainability standards. For instance, Malaysia's diplomatic engagement has evolved to incorporate strategic narrative-building to counter such perceptions, highlighting palm oil's role in rural development and its compliance with sustainability criteria. However, these efforts often face resistance from European stakeholders, who continue to advance regulatory frameworks that restrict palm oil imports under the guise of environmental protection. Recent studies have argued that such policies are not purely ecocentric but also serve economic interests, as seen in the European Union's Renewable Energy Directive (RED II), which effectively phases out palm oil-based biodiesel. Furthermore, the effectiveness of voluntary sustainability ideas is a credible mechanism for improving practices, but others view it as an insufficient standard like RSPO is subject to intense scrutiny. Some scholars argue that RSPO responds to the structural inequalities embedded in global palm oil supply chains. Indeed, although scientific assessments show that palm oil's environmental footprint is comparable or even superior to alternative oils when measured per yield. The negative campaigns selectively omit such data. Certification itself, despite its promise, has yielded mixed results, as some studies find limited evidence that RSPO membership alone leads to improvements in forest protection or community welfare [30].

Despite considerable efforts to demonstrate the sustainability of palm oil, the commodity continues to be entangled in a web of misinformation and politicized narratives. Anti-palm oil campaigns frequently rely on emotionally charged imagery and one-sided reporting, which complicates rational policy discussions and undermines the credibility of scientific findings. This distortion is often exacerbated by Western non-governmental organizations (NGOs) and advocacy networks that utilize digital media platforms to mobilize public opinion against palm oil-producing countries. Consequently, this narrative has led to the stigmatization of palm oil as an inherently destructive product, regardless of its comparative efficiency in land use and yield when contrasted with other vegetable oils. Notably, a growing body of literature challenges the binary portrayal of palm oil, arguing instead for a contextualized understanding that acknowledges both its environmental trade-offs and socio-economic benefits. Furthermore, recent research highlights the selective use of evidence by advocacy groups, where negative data is amplified while positive sustainability developments—such as zero-deforestation pledges and jurisdictional approaches—are ignored.

Such biased representations, though often framed as environmental concerns, also intersect with geopolitical interests, particularly in trade relations between the European Union and Southeast Asia. The persistence of negative campaigns against palm oil is not solely grounded in environmental or health concerns, but also in deeply rooted structural and historical inequalities within global trade and communication systems. Media framing plays a crucial role in shaping public perceptions by emphasizing narratives that align with Western environmental priorities while downplaying the perspectives of producing countries. These campaigns often disregard the complex socio-economic realities in major producing nations such as Indonesia and Malaysia, where palm oil development has lifted millions out of poverty and contributed significantly to rural development. However, the global discourse remains skewed due to the asymmetric distribution of media power, where European and North American platforms dominate the flow of information. This imbalance has led to the marginalization of local voices and knowledge systems, creating a narrative gap that reinforces stereotypes and misinformation. Addressing this issue requires a more inclusive global dialogue that incorporates perspectives from the Global South, recognizes the development needs of palm oil-producing countries, and fosters equitable standards for sustainability certification that go beyond the interests of Northern consumers [31-36].

In response to these disparities in narrative power, several scholars and institutions have emphasized the importance of reframing the global discourse around palm oil by integrating local experiences and development goals. Recent research highlights the necessity of shifting the lens from a singular environmental focus to a multidimensional understanding that includes socio-economic equity, food security, and indigenous rights. For instance, in Indonesia, palm oil is not only a key export commodity but also a livelihood asset for over 16 million people, particularly in remote and underdeveloped regions. Framing the commodity solely through environmental damage neglects the broader context in which smallholders operate, including limited access to markets, credit, and sustainable certification schemes. Furthermore, negative campaigns often fail to distinguish between large-scale agribusiness practices and those of independent smallholders, resulting in generalizations that hinder inclusive policy design. A more balanced discourse would require not only transparent and evidence-based media representations but also increased collaboration between producer nations, NGOs, and global institutions to co-create narratives that reflect both ecological and human development objectives [37-39].

The role of international environmental NGOs in shaping public perception toward palm oil cannot be overlooked, especially considering their significant influence in media discourse and global consumer behavior. Global NGOs (WWF, 2020) have repeatedly highlighted deforestation and biodiversity loss linked to unsustainable palm oil practices, often without differentiating between certified and non-certified producers. These campaigns, while may be a bit grounded in environmental concerns, have at times contributed to generalized negative framings that ignore regional variations in governance and sustainability efforts. Studies have shown that such framings tend to privilege Western-centric environmental narratives, sidelining the socio-economic realities of producer countries. Furthermore, NGOs often collaborate with media outlets to amplify their messages, leading to intensified public pressure on global companies to divest from palm oil, regardless of its sustainability certifications. This strategy has proven effective in influencing corporate sourcing policies, but

it raises ethical questions about selective transparency and the oversimplification of complex agricultural systems. Consequently, scholarly critiques argue for more balanced NGO advocacy that integrates local stakeholder voices, supports smallholder inclusion, and promotes nuanced storytelling based on empirical data rather than moral binaries. By integrating such multi-actor perspectives, literature reveals the need to go beyond polarized debates and toward collaborative problem-solving in the palm oil sector [40-43].

Beyond civil society and environmental organizations, the role of transnational policy coalitions has also intensified the narrative against palm oil, particularly in regions where regulatory frameworks align with climate agendas. The European Union, for instance, through its Renewable Energy Directive II (RED II), has classified palm oil as a high-risk biofuel feedstock, thereby legitimizing trade restrictions under environmental pretenses. While this regulatory stance claims to be evidence-based, several scholars have criticized its methodological bias and lack of consideration for scientific counter-evidence regarding palm oil's comparative yield efficiency and land-use implications. These policy-based narratives often perpetuate the misconception that replacing palm oil with alternative oils such as soy or rapeseed would mitigate environmental harm, despite evidence showing higher land and water footprints associated with such substitutes. Moreover, research has emphasized the geopolitical and economic undercurrents of such policies, suggesting they serve dual purposes of environmental protection and agricultural protectionism. Thus, literature has increasingly moved toward a consensus that any effort to address palm oil sustainability must be situated within a broader, more balanced framework that accounts for both environmental and socio-economic trade-offs. Based on these theoretical insights and ongoing academic debates, this study adopts a qualitative literature review approach to analyze how negative campaigns against palm oil have evolved, the actors involved, the dominant discourses employed, and the potential pathways toward more constructive engagement [44-47].

Methodology

This study employed a qualitative literature review approach to critically analyze the construction, dissemination, and contestation of negative campaigns against palm oil in global discourse. Unlike systematic literature reviews that rely on strict inclusion criteria and quantifiable metrics, qualitative literature reviews emphasize depth, interpretative synthesis, and thematic exploration. This approach is particularly suitable for understanding complex socio-political phenomena such as environmental narratives, where meaning is shaped by discourse, framing, and power relations. Therefore, the study does not aim to statistically generalize findings but to develop a conceptual understanding of how palm oil is framed negatively in the international arena [48,49].

The data for this review consisted of 60 peer-reviewed academic articles published between 2015 and 2024, sourced from several databases. To ensure academic credibility and relevance, only journal articles published in English, with a clear focus on palm oil, environmental discourse, campaign strategies, or sustainability governance, were selected. In addition, reports from international organizations, environmental NGOs, and selected government publications were used as supplementary material to enrich the analysis and provide context. Duplicates, inaccessible full texts, and articles lacking analytical content were excluded.

To organize and analyze the selected literature, the articles were imported and managed using Mendeley Desktop, which also facilitated citation tracking and the identification of recurring themes. Thematic analysis was then conducted by reading each article closely and coding relevant content related to the framing of palm oil, actor involvement, narrative strategies, and counter-campaigns. This process followed the guidelines which emphasized the flexibility of thematic analysis in identifying patterns across qualitative data. Themes were refined iteratively through inductive reasoning, allowing the researcher to construct an interpretative synthesis that highlights how narratives against palm oil are shaped by a constellation of actors, interests, and communication tactics [50].

Furthermore, critical discourse analysis (CDA) was used as a supplementary analytical lens to examine the power structures embedded in the language of the campaigns. CDA enables researchers to uncover how language reflects ideological positions and power asymmetries, particularly in sustainability communication. Through this integrated approach, the study aims to provide a comprehensive understanding of the underlying motivations, mechanisms, and implications of anti-palm oil narratives in contemporary environmental and trade debates [51].

Results and Discussion

The findings of this qualitative literature review reveal that negative campaigns against palm oil are largely rooted in environmental narratives that highlight deforestation, biodiversity loss, and climate change. These narratives are often shaped by Western environmental NGOs, media outlets, and policymakers who frame palm oil as an unsustainable and harmful commodity. While some of these concerns are legitimate, particularly regarding unsustainable land conversion and habitat destruction, the campaigns frequently rely on generalized assumptions that fail to account for context-specific variations in sustainability practices among producers in Southeast Asia.

The dominant narrative surrounding palm oil tends to prioritize ecological concerns while minimizing the socio-economic realities of producing countries. Numerous studies have shown that palm oil is among the most efficient oil crops in terms of land use and productivity. It supports millions of smallholder farmers in Indonesia and Malaysia, providing critical income and employment in rural areas. However, the framing used in many campaigns overlooks these development dimensions and instead promotes alternative oils that often require more land and water, thus introducing new sustainability challenges. This selective advocacy contributes to a distorted perception of palm oil relative to its alternatives [52].

Media discourse analysis suggests that campaign success is closely tied to the framing strategies used to emotionally engage audiences. It has been argued that strategic media framing amplifies environmental concerns and simplifies complex issues, often portraying palm oil as inherently destructive. NGOs leverage visual imagery and emotionally charged language to provoke public concern and influence consumer behavior. The widespread dissemination of such narratives through digital media, advertising, and political lobbying has contributed to regulatory pressures, such as labeling requirements and import restrictions in the European Union. In response to these campaigns, palm oil-producing countries and industry stakeholders have developed a range of counter-narratives and strategies. These include the promotion of national certification systems such as the Malaysian

Sustainable Palm Oil (MSPO) and the Indonesian Sustainable Palm Oil (ISPO), as well as diplomatic efforts to reframe palm oil as a sustainable development tool. However, these efforts face challenges in gaining global legitimacy due to entrenched biases in international sustainability standards, which often reflect the priorities of Northern stakeholders over Southern realities. Additionally, the Roundtable on Sustainable Palm Oil (RSPO), while widely recognized, has been criticized for failing to fully represent smallholder interests and local contexts.

Power asymmetries in global environmental discourse continue to shape how palm oil is portrayed and regulated. It has been noted that sustainability standards are often established through institutional arrangements that marginalize the voices of producer countries. The resulting governance structure reinforces a hierarchy in which Global North actors dominate sustainability narratives, creating imbalances in trade negotiations and international policymaking. These dynamics not only affect palm oil's reputation but also perpetuate broader structural inequalities in global environmental governance [53].

Furthermore, recent literature has highlighted the increasing role of diplomatic and economic retaliation in palm oil discourse. For example, Malaysia and Indonesia have filed complaints with the World Trade Organization (WTO) against the EU's Renewable Energy Directive II (RED II), claiming it discriminates against palm oil-based biofuels. At the same time, these countries are expanding strategic narratives that portray palm oil as a symbol of sovereignty and resistance to Western economic dominance. These diplomatic maneuvers are accompanied by investments in public diplomacy, trade diversification, and strategic partnerships with countries less influenced by anti-palm oil sentiment.

The evolving counter-narratives reflect an attempt to reassert agency in a global debate that has long been dominated by external actors. Initiatives such as joint palm oil advocacy platforms by ASEAN countries and coordinated media strategies are aimed at reshaping global perceptions. However, the effectiveness of these responses remains uneven due to limited access to international media platforms and the persistence of negative framing in Western markets. This underscores the need for a more inclusive and balanced global discourse that recognizes the complexity of sustainability in different contexts and allows for equitable participation in agenda setting.

In summary, the analysis confirms that negative campaigns against palm oil are driven by a combination of environmental framing, geopolitical interests, and institutional power imbalances. While the concerns raised by these campaigns are not entirely unfounded, they are often presented in a way that lacks nuance and disproportionately penalizes producers in the Global South. Counter-efforts by palm oil-producing countries are beginning to challenge dominant narratives, but structural barriers remain. A shift toward more dialogic, evidence-based, and participatory approaches to sustainability governance is essential for ensuring that future debates around palm oil are more equitable and informed by a broader range of perspectives [54-56].

Conclusion and Implications

This study has examined the construction, dissemination, and contestation of negative campaigns against palm oil within global environmental discourse. The findings reveal that these campaigns are not merely ecological in nature but deeply embedded in power relations, geopolitical interests, and trade dynamics. While

concerns about environmental degradation and sustainability may be a bit legitimate to some extent, the dominant narratives surrounding palm oil—especially in the Global North—often disregard the socio-economic realities of producing countries. The framing of palm oil as an environmental villain simplifies complex production systems, obscures the role of alternative commodities, and marginalizes the voices of smallholder farmers and local stakeholders.

Through a qualitative literature review of over 60 recent academic sources, this study has identified key actors—including Western NGOs, media institutions, and policymakers—who construct and amplify anti-palm oil narratives. These actors employ selective framing techniques and moral arguments that influence both public perception and international policy. Simultaneously, responses from producing countries demonstrate efforts to reclaim narrative sovereignty through diplomatic channels, counter-campaigns, and sustainable certification initiatives. However, these efforts often face structural disadvantages due to asymmetries in global media access, normative power, and regulatory influence.

The implications of these findings are twofold. First, for research and theory, this study highlights the need for a more nuanced and multi-scalar analysis of environmental narratives that considers not only ecological outcomes but also issues of discourse, justice, and representation. Future scholarship should further explore the intersection of environmental communication and global political economy. Second, for policy and practice, the study suggests that international sustainability debates must be more inclusive and equitable, allowing for balanced assessments of all vegetable oil crops and greater participation from producing nations in shaping global standards.

By unpacking the ideological and strategic layers of negative campaigns against palm oil, this research contributes to a deeper understanding of environmental governance and the politics of narrative. It calls for reframing sustainability not as a one-size-fits-all paradigm imposed from the Global North, but as a shared responsibility grounded in fairness, scientific rigor, and respect for diverse development paths.

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