



Strategic storytelling in the age of sustainability



Laurence Dessart ^{a,*}, Willem Standaert ^{a,b}

^a HEC-Liège, Management School of the University of Liège, 14 Rue Louvrex, 4000 Liège, Belgium

^b Ghent University, Belgium

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Abstract Sustainability is high on the strategic agenda and is here to stay. While some companies have been sustainable since inception, others are repositioning themselves to be associated with sustainability values. In both situations, communicating about sustainability is key but requires delicate handling to avoid misleading perceptions. Authenticity and emotions are therefore key dimensions of sustainability communication, which match with strategic storytelling elements. Storytelling is discussed in this article as a powerful mechanism to bring about the desired change in individuals, communities, organizations, and society. Drawing from the literature on storytelling, we present, discuss, and illustrate a framework with four strategic elements for companies that want to be successful with sustainability storytelling, which we refer to as the 4 A's: Aim (the "why" of the story), Actors (actively engaging stakeholders and associating with partners), Aspiration (using an aspirational context), and Action (using the right media to bring your story to life). We also emphasize that a holistic approach is key to doing sustainability storytelling the right way. We conclude with general recommendations that managers must consider when conducting sustainability storytelling.

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1. The strategic importance of sustainability

The origins of sustainability in a corporate context can be traced back to the philanthropism of

* Corresponding author

E-mail addresses: laurence.dessart@uliege.be (L. Dessart), willem.standaert@uliege.be (W. Standaert)

[^] Authors contributed equally, listed in alphabetical order

business moguls such as Andrew Carnegie, John D. Rockefeller, and Henry Ford in the early 20th century (Wulfson, 2001). Since the 1960s, corporate social responsibility (CSR) became increasingly institutionalized in the Western world but was mostly focused on minimizing or eliminating harmful effects of businesses on society and the environment (Mohr et al., 2001). As such, CSR obtained a place on the strategic agenda, as it was associated with a “license,” or implicit permission to operate (Demuijnck & Fasteur, 2016). To this avail, businesses engaged in public relations via corporate communication. This involves trying to get coverage from third-party media on business-related, newsworthy items to nurture a favorable opinion within different stakeholder communities (Dhanesh, 2017).

Borrowing from the forestry industry—in which sustainability refers to the idea of not harvesting more than what the forest can provide—the United Nations (UN) Brundtland Commission defined sustainable development as “meeting the needs of the present without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs” (United Nations, 1987). In response to the UN’s call for action, businesses progressively started to consider not just their financial performance, but also their impact on society and the environment. More specifically, in addition to reporting the profit bottom line, companies increasingly measured, reduced, and reported people and planet “bottom lines” (Paun, 2018; Wilburn & Wilburn, 2014). Collectively, these three Ps are referred to as the “triple bottom line,” and this concept has since gained significant interest from businesses, governmental organizations, and academia (Larivière & Smit, 2022). Consistent with the claim of Porter and Kramer (2006) that CSR can be a source of competitive advantage, prior research has found that companies that do not just strive for profit, but also focus on people and planet impact, outperform peers both financially and in terms of survival chances (Elkington, 1997).

Nowadays, the terms CSR and corporate sustainability are sometimes used interchangeably. However, van Marrewijk (2003, p. 102) makes an important distinction between them in the sense that CSR refers to responsibility aspects of organizations (i.e., reporting and transparency), while corporate sustainability focuses on the agency of organizations in terms of value creation “demonstrating the inclusion of social and environmental concerns in business operations and in interactions with stakeholders.” The author further highlights that an advanced level of

sustainability involves “a synergistic, win-together approach with all relevant stakeholders” (p. 102).

Sustainability has seen increased interest in the corporate world over the last few decades, but the 17 Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) by the UN caused a seismic shift in 2015. The SDGs cover a broad range of issues and are formulated in a generic way. While it may require some translation, all types of businesses can identify with these goals, as illustrated by research ranging from tourism (Boluk et al., 2019) to the fishing industry (Tsolakis et al., 2021). The SDGs have also been adopted as a language that companies can use to communicate with different types of stakeholders. Indeed, customers, employees, regulators, and other stakeholders are playing more active roles as co-creators in the sustainability practices of companies (Kemper & Ballantine, 2019; Leroy-Werelds & Matthes, 2022; Paun, 2018; van Riel et al., 2021), to the extent that they put pressure on companies to act more sustainably. For example, when the Parental Rights in Education Act—known as the “Don’t Say Gay” bill—was passed in Florida, Walt Disney Company leadership did not speak up publicly as it had always tried to stay out of politics and reasoned that their stories speak to their support of diversity. Employees were outraged about the lack of action and, in response, organized walkouts and launched a website with a list of demands for leadership.

The demand for sustainable practices and products has also risen in the last few years, as the COVID-19 pandemic exacerbated the need to care for our environment and others—and to report doing so (Zharfpeykan & Ng, 2021). Reputation and image are among the top three reasons for companies to “do good” (Lim & Pope, 2021). This trend is also reflected in consumer purchases; in 2021, 33% of European consumers were reported to stop purchasing some brands because of their negative impact on the environment or society (GfK, 2021). In addition, ethical concerns and ideological incompatibility often cause consumers or other stakeholders to hate, reject, or boycott brands, resulting in severe reputational harm (Dessart & Cova, 2021; Hegner et al., 2017).

2. Communicating sustainability

Given its strategic importance, companies have started to incorporate sustainability in their marketing strategies (de Ruyter et al., 2022; Larivière & Smit, 2022), which can be enacted using an offering-centric approach (i.e., creating and promoting more sustainable products or services),

focusing on changing customer lifestyles and behaviors, or implementing an approach that aims to transform society and challenge norms (Kemper & Ballantine, 2019). Regardless of how it is enacted, sustainability communication entails a clear strategic impetus to improve the related brand image and corporate reputation (Baldassarre & Campo, 2016; Leroi-Werelds & Matthes, 2022).

Some companies (e.g., Tesla, Patagonia, Le Pain Quotidien, or Tony's Chocolonely) have had sustainability at the core of their business and narrative since inception. These companies can be referred to as "born sustainable" (Todeschini et al., 2017) or "sustainability natives" (Rodriguez-Vila & Bharadwaj, 2017), and they continue to be pioneers of sustainability strategies. Other companies have been founded and developed without sustainability at the core but now seek to align with such values—otherwise known as "sustainability immigrants" (Rodriguez-Vila & Bharadwaj, 2017). Finally, some companies are considered "anti-sustainable" by nature, such as oil or traditional fast-food companies.

For any type of company, communicating its sustainable practices is a delicate task. In particular, companies that communicate inadequately or too much about sustainability can be accused of greenwashing (Leroi-Werelds & Matthes, 2022; Reilly & Hynan, 2014). Greenwashing accusations can even be an issue for "sustainability natives." For example, juice brand Innocent (now owned by Coca-Cola) had its latest ad banned in the UK on account of being misleading. The advert promoted Innocent as a sustainable company, but this claim was considered inappropriate with regard to their usage of plastic bottles (see Appendix 1).

Successful communication about sustainability establishes authenticity and credibility (Alhouti et al., 2016; Larivière & Smit, 2022), which can be obtained by clearly outlining the company's genuine motivations, transparently reporting goal attainment, and providing tangible evidence and proof of real sustainability impact (Leroi-Werelds & Matthes, 2022). Credibility can be further substantiated by providing testimonials, labels, or certificates from independent bodies that perform an audit based on standards (Zhang et al., 2014). In addition to such functional characteristics, effective sustainability communication needs to move people emotionally (Leroi-Werelds & Matthes, 2022; Matthes et al., 2014). Communication media that offer multisensory experiences are most effective at evoking an emotional response (Yoganathan et al., 2019), including virtual reality technology (Laukkanen et al., 2022).

Practitioners and scholars alike recognize the importance of moving beyond void sustainability marketing communication to following a strategic direction that effectively embeds a real and trustworthy commitment to "do the right thing" (Dowel & Jackson, 2020; Leroi-Werelds & Matthes, 2022). This strategic goal—in which emotions play an important role—can be achieved by integrating sustainability into storytelling (Cowan & Guzman, 2020; Spear & Roper, 2013).

3. Strategic storytelling

Storytelling is increasingly recognized as a tool for strategic change (James & Minnis, 2004; Spear & Roper, 2013), including fostering a company's sustainable reputation and image. *Storytelling* is a strategic branding practice by which companies apply narrative structures over branded content. Thanks to its unique structure, storytelling's power has been widely evidenced, as it engages audiences cognitively, emotionally, and behaviorally (Dessart & Pitardi, 2019), and provides meaning to brands (Mills & Robson, 2020). A story structure is typically composed of three key elements: the moral gist, the characters, and the plot.

First, the moral gist of stories is paramount in strategic storytelling. This "lesson learned" is what makes the story most powerful (Pera & Viglia, 2016) and is likely to generate the most word-of-mouth and response from the audience (Dessart & Pitardi, 2019). A strong lesson learned, authenticity (Lundqvist et al., 2013), and verisimilitude (i.e., how believable and realistic the story is) are instrumental strategic storytelling elements (van Laer et al., 2014) because they create trust in the story. The moral gist needs to be clearly tied to business objectives to convey a strong message and hold strategic potential.

The second element refers to the characters of the story, with whom the audience is able to identify and empathize (Pera & Viglia, 2016). In strategic storytelling, it is important to allow stakeholders to strongly identify with the characters because this identification process will most likely sustain positive attitudes toward change and lead to real action. When we empathize with characters, we want to be and act like them. Typically, a clear hero to root for, and a problem or villain that they are confronted with, are key in stimulating engagement. One way to facilitate identification and empathy even more directly is to involve stakeholders in storytelling by making them feel like the protagonists (i.e., allowing them to be (co-)creators of the story). Such involvement

has the potential to improve the impact of storytelling on brands, consumers, and society (Dessart & Pitardi, 2019; Hollebeek et al., 2022), in terms of adherence to the story, believability, and trust (Dhanesh, 2017) leading to favorable outcomes for brand awareness, attachment, and advocacy (de Regt et al., 2021).

Unfortunately, stakeholder involvement in storytelling is usually seen as a top-down communication practice aimed at increasing the trust and credibility of the message proposed by the brand (O’Riordan & Fairbrass, 2014). Stakeholders are not usually actively involved in storytelling; rather, they are seen as passive recipients of communication messages by the brand (Baldassarre & Campo, 2016). However, bottom-up instances of stakeholder involvement in storytelling have also been recognized, in which stakeholders’ opinions, needs, and preferences are considered in creating a message. One type of such involvement is purely based on stakeholder initiative without any firm-based incentive or support, as stakeholders create a narrative through reviews and feedback, for which social media are often used (Gorry & Westbrook, 2011; van Laer et al., 2019). In another bottom-up type of stakeholder involvement, stakeholders actively help create the message based on a brand initiative, such as providing a story cue (Kamleitner et al., 2019), also referred to as “story-doing” (de Regt et al., 2021).

The third key element of a story structure taps into the context of the story, its setup, and its unfolding. It is a crucial element to immerse the audience. A life-like context will increase the realistic aspect of the story (van Laer et al., 2014), while a fictional setup will likely create strong transportation into the story universe (Escalas, 2004). In storytelling literature, this element is called the plot. Using causality and chronology, the plot provides logical structure and meaning to the story (Green & Brock, 2002). As the plot unfolds and reveals a strong cause-and-effect relationship, stakeholders can clearly identify how their—or others’—actions contribute to the story, fostering evolution or revolution.

Finally, choosing the appropriate media for the objective and target audience is key, as a story can be told using numerous methods. Evolving from traditional forms of storytelling, like oral tales or books, narratives are now transmitted in a variety of ways, each with unique characteristics. Social media is often used nowadays to foster positive effects and attitudes via storytelling (Huang et al., 2018), and consumer reviews written in a narrative way are also often recognized as having a strong

impact on consumer decision-making (van Laer et al., 2019). Video-based storytelling is also common, and it can provide an immersive experience that generates strong emotions and deep transportation into the story context (Dessart, 2018; Pera & Viglia, 2016). Recent research recognizes that using advanced technologies like virtual reality for storytelling may engender even further immersion and stronger experiences for audiences (Cummings et al., 2022; de Regt et al., 2021).

While storytelling holds strong potential for strategic change and improved stakeholder engagement due to its unique elements, prior research does not provide guidance on how strategic storytelling can be employed for sustainability values.

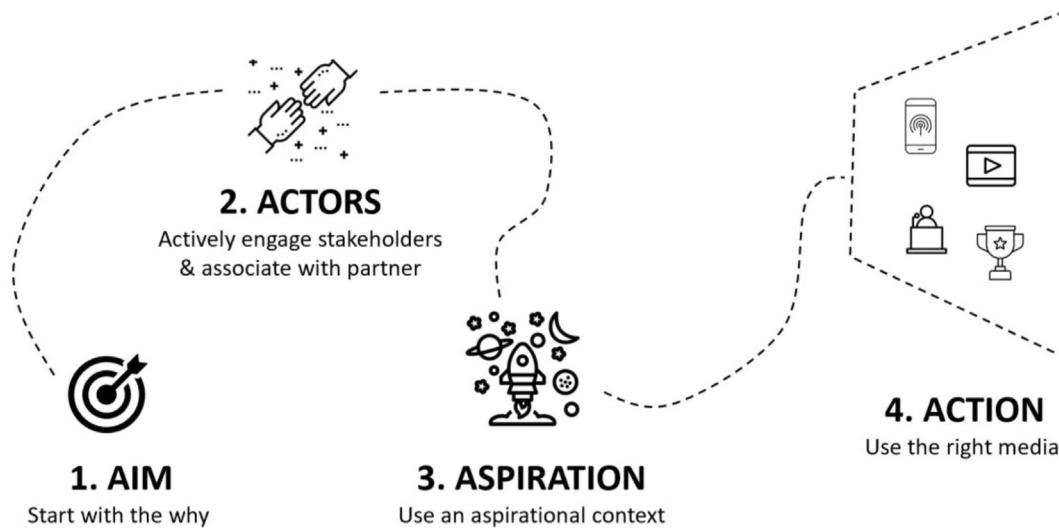
4. Four strategic story elements for successful sustainability storytelling

Per the separate literature streams on sustainability communication and storytelling, both have clear, overlapping focus points. Indeed, best practices for each involve authenticity, emotions, the use of co-creation, and multi-sensory experiences. In Section 4, we draw upon both streams—as well as a synthesis of real-life business cases—to develop a framework with four strategic elements as a holistic approach toward impactful sustainability storytelling (see Figure 1). These elements, stemming directly from the storytelling literature discussed in Section 3, are illustrated throughout this section. What we propose is not just a set of distinct elements but rather an interconnected framework that maximizes effectiveness (Leroi-Werelds & Matthes, 2022). While managers can start from any of the elements, our experience indicates that following the four steps as they are outlined in Figure 1 is the most productive course of action.

4.1. Start with the “why” of the story (Aim)

As coined by Simon Sinek (2009), the “why” (i.e., purpose) of a business is key in inspiring stakeholders and creating a reason to believe. We distinguish three strategic purposes for which companies can engage in sustainability storytelling: highlighting existing sustainability values, repositioning toward sustainability values, and transforming ecosystems or society around sustainability values. The chosen strategic purpose should drive the story plot and create a strong lesson learned or moral gist (Pera & Viglia, 2016).

Figure 1. Strategic story elements for sustainability storytelling



4.1.1. Highlighting sustainability values

This mainly concerns companies that are sustainable at heart. Leveraging sustainability storytelling from the very start—using it as a unique selling proposition—is increasingly common. Dove¹ provides an example of this, as it has prioritized inclusion and diversity as core brand values for many years (Dessart & Pitardi, 2019). In its long history of storytelling, it has advocated for body positivity, which empowers customers via relatable ad characters and “real” people (i.e., not models) of varying ages, ethnicities, and body types. In one commercial (see Appendix 1), a sketch drawing is made based on a self-description and a description of a stranger that they meet. The stranger’s description is much more positive, resulting in a more beautiful sketch. The focus on the lesson learned is strong: “Real Beauty” means feeling good about how you look. Such brands can also use their own history of sustainability values as a temporal sequence, showing their growth and impact on society over time.

4.1.2. Repositioning toward sustainability values

Companies using this approach are usually not sustainable at heart but want to move toward more ethical values (Rodriguez-Vila & Bharadwaj, 2017). Such companies typically make one or more aspects of their business model more sustainable (Kemper & Ballantine, 2019; Muncy & Iyer, 2021), for instance, by changing their

sourcing strategies, production processes, product characteristics, or go-to-market approaches (e.g., distributor network). Companies repositioning toward more sustainability should pay specific attention in their storytelling endeavors to recognize the position they come from and how they will fundamentally shift. They can also highlight their more sustainable offering in the plot. An example of a company motivated by repositioning values is the French oil and gas company TotalEnergies. Since its rebranding (previously Total), the company has expanded toward sustainable sources of energy production, such as solar panels, storage, and distribution (e.g., EV charging stations; Mallet & White, 2021). Moreover, TotalEnergies is expanding its services from products to solutions. Its sustainability values also extend beyond environmental concerns: in early 2022, it ended its operations in Myanmar because of human rights abuses.

Repositioning toward sustainability is of particular concern when companies realign to recover from a crisis. This type of repositioning occurs when the strongest greenwashing concerns may arise, necessitating a thoughtful storytelling approach. When sustainable claims are incongruent with stakeholders’ prior experience with the brand, sustainable repositioning may hurt the brand and result in a stronger backlash (Leroi-Werelds & Matthes, 2022). In this situation, the brand must acknowledge the crisis, show it learned its lesson and wants to correct it, and express hope that consumers will trust it in its efforts. The company should go beyond appeasing its stakeholders and using a contrived narrative like a Band-

¹ Note that Dove is part of the large multinational Unilever that is not (yet) fully sustainable.

Aid. If the claims are serious, a real transformation needs to appear in the business practices (e.g., production, human resources, transportation, sourcing, data management, etc.) and in its DNA, not just in marketing and communications. The public needs to have proof of these changes, which can only occur slowly over the long term. One example of this is the rebranding of Facebook under its new name Meta amid several accusations of poor data and human resources management. This rebranding has been met with strong skepticism from the public who still awaits real internal changes within the company (Lee Yohn, 2021).

4.1.3. Transforming ecosystems or society with sustainability values at the core

The company is motivated to use storytelling as an instrument to support broader societal impact via changes in consumer behavior and the ecosystem in which it operates (Hopwood et al., 2005). The storytelling plot, therefore, goes beyond the company and highlights others in the ecosystem or society. Tony's Chocolonely is a Dutch chocolate manufacturing company that actively fights child slavery surrounding global chocolate production and is recognized as the most sustainable brand in the Netherlands.² Beyond producing sustainable chocolate, it pledges to ban slavery practices in chocolate production across the globe. One interesting approach to storytelling was Tony's Chocolonely's development of a 21-minute documentary (see Appendix 1), which amplifies cocoa farmers by sharing their perspective on aspects such as fairness in the industry, their dreams, and their aspirations. In the whole documentary, Tony's Chocolonely is not mentioned once.

4.2. Actively engage stakeholders and associate with partners (Actors)

While engaging a multitude of stakeholders has been central to managerial and scholarly thinking on sustainability, this notion is still nascent when it comes to marketing and branding literature (Brodie et al., 2019)—including storytelling in which stakeholder engagement has not been explored. Whereas the initial and principal focus in marketing has long been on engaging customers (e.g., Hollebeek, 2011), recent work recognizes that organizations need to engage a network of

actors around their brands, including employees, suppliers, partners, government, citizens, or society at large (O'Riordan & Fairbrass, 2014; van Riel et al., 2021). As stakeholder engagement is dependent upon stakeholders' willingness to invest their time and efforts (Brodie et al., 2019), their varying interests need to be understood and managed carefully (Hollebeek et al., 2018). Stakeholder engagement in sustainability storytelling, therefore, involves recognizing and respecting others' inclinations (Dhanesh, 2017; Noland & Phillips, 2010). This is necessary for building trustful relationships and creating social capital for the common good (Maak, 2007). Prior research suggests that co-creating stories related to sustainability may positively impact consumer trust and loyalty (Iglesias et al., 2020).

Stakeholders can be characterized in terms of their internal or external nature. Figure 2 represents this notion on a continuum, as there is no clear-cut line between the extremes. A multitude of different stakeholders can engage in each storytelling initiative. No matter who is engaged, moving passive audiences into more active, contributory roles—by becoming protagonists in so-called "story-doing" (de Regt et al., 2021)—makes sustainability storytelling more impactful. However, we also note that engaging stakeholders, especially external ones, in sustainability storytelling can backfire and lead to salient negative forms of engagement (i.e., expressing disagreement or criticism), which can harm the brand (Bowden et al., 2017).

4.2.1. Internal stakeholders

Employees are a critical group of internal stakeholders to engage in storytelling for various reasons: they represent the brand as frontline employees, are the first ambassadors of the brand externally, and when they wish to rebel against a brand, they also have strong resources and information to attack it. For instance, disgruntled Starbucks employees formed online communities in which they anonymously bashed their—often former—employer. Indeed, while the company typically presents itself as a champion of inclusivity and acceptance, Starbucks employees have complained using stories reflecting poor consideration of their well-being at work. In addition to managing the wider brand reputation, engaging internal stakeholders is also key for employer branding, which concerns attracting and retaining talent (Biedenbach and Manzhynski, 2016).

Some companies are developing more internal initiatives to make employees contribute and actively help shape sustainability values and

² See the Sustainable Brand Index, which is based on consumer perceptions (Sustainable Brand Index, 2022 <https://www.sb-index.com/the-netherlands>).

Figure 2. Stakeholder type continuum



stories. For instance, Staples uses a proprietary intranet (“The Hub”) to engage its 70,000 associates in activities related to the company’s core values (Reilly & Hynan, 2014). Morgan Stanley also regularly involves its employees around the world in real-life community activities that aim to support children’s health, as part of their 60-year-old “Giving back” program, among others. Building a playground from scratch in a Boston-area neighborhood with Morgan Stanley (2018) employee volunteers is an example of actions that embody the sustainability values of the company. As they communicate this, employees become the protagonists in the story.

4.2.2. External stakeholders

Customers are the primary category of external stakeholders to actively engage in sustainability storytelling. Some customers can be very close ambassadors of the firm, akin to internal stakeholders, but the wider mass of customers is rather external. Customer engagement can take many forms and support various objectives (Dessart & Pitardi, 2019), and it has been extensively researched in social media environments (Dessart et al., 2015). In these environments, sporadic and low-commitment engagement consists of comments, shares, or likes. Emerging forms of more active customer engagement in brand storytelling include asking for their contribution before launching sustainability storytelling or collecting their comments a posteriori. To go even further, brands like Patagonia invite customers to give back worn outfits with an initiative called “Wornwear” (Michel et al., 2019). Before trading their gear, customers are invited to share their story of brand usage on the Wornwear platform. As such, customers become the heroes of their own stories, associating with the brand ethos and values and inspiring others to act the same. Collectively, these customer stories contribute to the wider brand narrative on sustainability.

Beyond employees or customers, companies can also engage business partners (e.g., suppliers,

vendors, strategic partners), governments, policy-makers, NGOs, and other members of society in strategic storytelling. For instance, investors—who can be considered as both internal and external stakeholders—and governments can have creative involvement in storytelling. The Environmental Defenders Office of Queensland (EDO QLD) in Australia provides an example of this. The NGO has a history of raising money and awareness using fundraising campaigns. One of its campaigns features EDO QLD representatives expressing their concerns and needs for support to bring up climate change issues to the High Court of Australia. Through a convincing narrative that expresses the issues at stake, along with concrete examples, stories of local actors, and exemplars of the work they currently pursue, EDO QLD mobilizes potential investors to get engaged in their fight. At the same time, the organization urges local authorities and governments to revise their policies, support well-being in the area, and stop actions that destroy Queensland’s natural habitat. Thanks to a total of 13 campaigns on the crowdfunding website Chuffed.org, EDO QLD has raised over 1,000,000 AUD.

Active stakeholder engagement moves the narrative away from the brand. Instead, stakeholders (e.g., customers, partners, suppliers, employees) become the heroes. Whether engagement is achieved via interactive technologies, community activities, or by asking stakeholders’ opinions online, active engagement will ramp up their sense of involvement, importance, and impact. In Section 4.2.3., we further discuss engagement with strategic partners (i.e., a specific type of stakeholder who can increase the scope and impact of the narrative).

4.2.3. Associate with partners

To increase the perceived authenticity of storytelling, companies can associate with partners that have an established and undisputed sustainability reputation, whether it is a nonprofit organization, celebrity, or local or international activist. As such, the legitimacy of the brand to use

sustainability storytelling is reinforced and the risks of washing perceptions are reduced. Brands can also team up under the same sustainability efforts to expand their reach and impact (e.g., on policy-making or to push innovation further; Wassmer et al., 2017).

The (RED) organization presents an example of a well-established, sustainability-oriented organization that many brands partner with (see Appendix 1). With the initial aim to fight AIDS, U2 singer Bono and activist Bobby Shriver created (RED) in 2006. Since then, (RED) has developed into a global network—including a large array of well-known brands, their customers, and their employees—with a broad sustainability-oriented mission. By creating (RED)-labeled products and experiences, associated brands help raise money for the Global Fund, one of the largest contributors to global health initiatives. The fund also helps fight the COVID-19 pandemic and other widespread diseases. (RED) has raised over \$700 million to date thanks to collaborations with over 70 business partners.

One of (RED)'s key partnerships was with Fiat, which "relaunched" its mythical model 500 car, making it 100% electric (see Appendix 1). Fiat, along with car makers of the same group, also committed to donating \$4 billion to the (RED) cause by 2023, and several sustainable features were added to the car, such as seats made from recycled plastic. The broader range of Fiat models has also been redesigned to be more sustainable. As such, Fiat exemplifies a strong sustainability partnership and illustrates a brand repositioning toward sustainability values (see above). However, the involvement with Fiat in sustainable values goes beyond partnering with (RED). In 2020, it issued a branding video narrated by Leonardo DiCaprio that showed the organization's commitment to sustainability with a strong moral compass and urge to act (see Appendix 1). In this example, Fiat partnered with a celebrity tied to climate change activism to reinforce the potential for the story to generate identification, a sense of urgency, and action. Indeed, a celebrity narrator evoked greater motivation among consumers than a random spokesperson. In addition, Stellantis, the group that owns Fiat, also states in its yearly sustainability report that it strongly involves company employees in community-support activities (see Appendix 1).

Another case in point is provided by the Formula E (FE) ecosystem (Standaert & Jarvenpaa, 2016), regarding the first fully-electric racing series and the first carbon-neutral sports since its inception. The competition offers a platform for developing

and showcasing electric vehicle technology, which is why many car manufacturers have joined the competition (in lieu of combustion-engine-based competitions). The races are held in the city centers to provide a tangible association with clean urban mobility. Beyond environmental concerns, FE supports access to education via its UNICEF partnership and promotes healthy living (within the framework of a United Nations program). In addition to car manufacturers, many B2B and B2C companies (e.g., ABB, Allianz, Enel, Heineken) are eager to become associated with FE and co-create stories around sustainability, often featuring drivers as protagonists. Moreover, fans also become active participants, as they can vote for their favorite driver using digital mechanisms. The drivers with the most votes then obtain additional electric power to use during the race to defend their position or overtake a competitor. Mahindra—one of the competing teams that also manufactures electric vehicles for road use—provided an incentive for fans to vote for them by promising to plant a tree for every vote.

4.3. Use an aspirational context (Aspiration)

Sustainability is a topic that is not typically considered "fun." Regarding environmental sustainability, for instance, the state of the world could be compared to that of a horror movie. To make the message more relatable and entertaining, sustainability storytelling can happen in a setting such as sports or entertainment. In sports, there are protagonists (athletes) that represent a bold and strong archetype. For example, the Union of European Football Associations (UEFA), made a documentary to support the fight against discrimination based on race, gender, ethnicity, religion, sexual orientation, or refugee background. In this 53-minute documentary called "Outraged" (see Appendix 1), personal stories of exclusion and discrimination are shared by well-known female and male soccer players (e.g., Megan Rapinoe and Paul Pogba), as well as coaches (e.g., José Mourinho) and referees. By using these role models that many fans aspire to, this campaign can have a bigger impact.

Another clear example of the power of an aspirational context relates to the "Fandom Forward" movement. This movement was established in 2005 as the "Harry Potter Alliance," which connected over 100,000 Harry Potter fans worldwide, but was renamed "Fandom Forward" to be more inclusive of different types of fans, as reflected in its mission (see Appendix 1): "Fandom

Forward turns fans into heroes. We use the power of story and popular culture to make activism accessible and sustainable.” This fan community organizes campaigns and mobilizes members to improve social justice, and their approach centers on joy, magic, and love. They also translate real-world human rights issues into stories of their heroes to make them more accessible and fun (Jenkins, 2012).

As another example, Nike used an inspiring storytelling context (i.e., outer space) when it launched a new range of sustainable sneakers. As it launched the “Space Hippie” range—a line of sneakers made exclusively of recycled material—just before the COVID-19 pandemic, Nike linked its sustainable product proposition to space exploration. This bold move was based on the premise that, like on Mars where materials are scarce, planet Earth also lacks supplies. As such, Nike created “Space Hippie,” a radical shoe design made of scraps or “space junk” (e.g., recycled foam material, plastic, or even t-shirts). The shoes had the lowest carbon footprint of any Nike product to date. While unable to sell the range on the date it was announced due to the pandemic, the story created such anticipation that on the actual launch, the sneakers sold out in minutes. As to the stakeholder engagement outlined above, proposing an aspirational environment will multiply stakeholders’ engagement by tapping into their desired selves. Nike’s approach was successful because it tapped into the

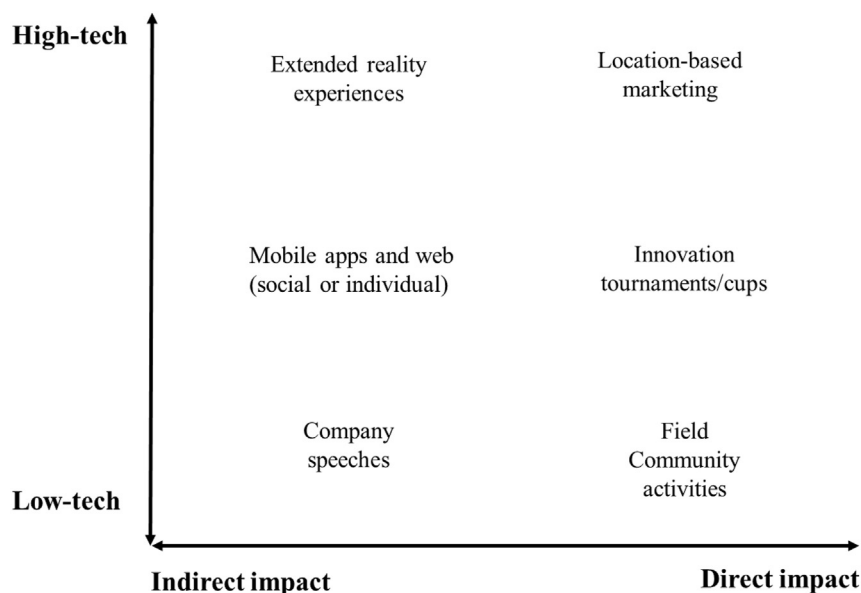
customer’s aspirations to be space explorers on top of the underlying desire to help reduce material waste.

4.4. Use the right media to bring your story to life (Action)

The medium of the story can be considered equally important as its contents for effective delivery. Some media are richer and more engaging than others. For instance, videos are more immersive and interactive than print ads for storytelling purposes (Dessart & Pitardi, 2019). A wide array of traditional and emerging technologies can be considered not only in delivering storytelling content but also as tools to better engage stakeholders (de Regt et al., 2021).

We propose a two-dimensional characterization of media through which different stakeholder groups can be engaged in sustainability storytelling (see Figure 3). The vertical axis ranges from low- to high-tech and concerns the level of technology involved in storytelling. Low-tech media approaches use little to no technology, whereas high-tech solutions involve more (advanced) technologies and can even be entirely virtual (De Keyser et al., 2019). The horizontal axis refers to the extent of the real-world impact of the actions undertaken as part of the storytelling: do actions address a real-world sustainability issue, and do people feel that the action makes a difference? “Direct impact” solutions

Figure 3. Storytelling media



involve physical engagement of the stakeholders, and field actions and are thus likely to have a quicker and stronger impact on sustainability outcomes (Leroi-Werelds & Matthes, 2022). On the other hand, “indirect impact” media tend to be further from the reality of the field and, as such, do not have an immediate effect on physical sustainability outcomes, such as activities and experiences in the virtual realm. Instead, indirect impact focuses on planting the seeds and creating awareness. Next, we provide illustrations of storytelling through media that have been identified as relevant in both the literature and business practice.

4.4.1. Extended reality (XR)

Extended reality (XR) is a very engaging medium to co-create a story with stakeholders because the receiver is physically active when they experience the XR environment, whether through augmented or virtual reality. By interacting with the environment, the user co-creates what happens to them and makes decisions, which manipulates the plot of the story in real life. Thanks to very high levels of immersion, XR technologies have particularly strong impacts on user attitudes and perceptions, resulting in high value-creation (de Regt et al., 2021). As an example, a virtual reality game called “Every Can Counts” (see Appendix 1) educates young people about waste sorting and recycling. Through the game, players can learn about the value of aluminum as a raw material and gain knowledge about proper waste recycling disposal systems. As they complete the recycling activities, players earn points depending on the level of difficulty.

4.4.2. Location-based marketing

Location-based marketing is high-tech, using geo-location data of a mobile phone, which can result in a high, direct impact. Philip Morris International (PMI), the tobacco company behind brands like Marlboro, provides an example of this. In July 2020, PMI launched the initiative “Our World is Not an Ashtray” to raise awareness about cigarette butt littering and to inspire people—especially customers—to reduce and remove litter. As part of this, it partnered with Litterati, a mobile app and online platform that aims to remove litter from the streets. Users can take a geo-tagged picture of litter which was then identified using artificial intelligence. Based on the aggregated data, high-litter areas and trends can be identified and acted upon by companies and governments alike. Groups are

formed and campaigns at different geographical scales are organized to incentivize users to clean up. Moreover, this partnership empowers user storytelling as it encourages them to share pictures and stories of their positive impacts. The website even features inspirational video stories from individuals and organizations that act to reduce litter.

4.4.3. Mobile apps and websites

Mobile apps and websites can be used actively (i.e., users can post, scan, add info, tilt or shake the device) or passively (i.e., users just lurk at what others are doing/posting). For instance, following the introduction of NutriScore in several European countries, Belgian company SmartWith Food created a mobile app that obtains the score of each food item in a shopping list and provides inspiration for recipes. Major national retailers like Colruyt Group are partnering with the app to provide the experience to their shoppers. Yuka is another well-known mobile app that helps users check the quality of the goods they consume on a regular basis. These technologies are numerous and very engaging for users.

Mobile apps and websites can involve varying levels of immersion and richness (e.g., text-based, pictures, audio, and video). Videos can transmit emotions and moral gist in a deeper, more impactful manner than other forms of media (Pera & Viglia, 2016). For instance, AG Insurance—the market leader in the Belgian insurance industry—launched an initiative to raise awareness about loneliness and to prevent or help overcome related mental health issues (see Appendix 1). In addition to an online platform that pairs people experiencing loneliness with (professional) caregivers, it made a video that features protagonists in a very personal way, such as using their first names prominently. The characters are portrayed so that different viewers can easily relate to them. In addition, AG Insurance developed an educational package to be used in classrooms. A key component of this package is a three-episode mini-series called “(In)Visible” which features a high school girl who wants to overcome her feelings of loneliness. Finally, mobile apps and websites can include social media (sharing) features that facilitate bottom-up storytelling.

4.4.4. Innovation tournaments or cups

Innovation tournaments or cups can be a mix of physical and tech, and allow users to dictate levels of participation. For instance, chemical

company BASF set up an online “Creator Space” program that focused on co-creating (open) innovations with the community about smart energy, food, and urban living, in which more than 6,000 stakeholders from industry, academia, and government engaged. This led to real-world projects implemented across the world (e.g., affordable, energy-efficient housing for low-income families or sanitized water in polluted environments).

4.4.5. Company speeches

Company speeches are a medium for storytelling that generates limited active participation by stakeholders—even if it can be relayed in a promotional video afterward. These speeches can be internal or external. Press conferences are one example of an external speech. In the launch of its (RED) partnership, Stellantis group organized a press conference entitled “Planting the seed of our future” in Turin, Italy—its headquarters—and invited (RED) co-founder Bono. It explained the partnership, vision, and pledge of Stellantis to be more sustainable. Such speeches have the benefit of being very impactful for those involved, including partners, media representatives, some employees, and other guests (see [Appendix 1](#)). The impact is limited for the wider pool of stakeholders not physically in attendance, with less than 500 views on YouTube in the span of 6 months.

4.4.6. Field activities

Field activities are low-tech but engaging for the stakeholders—at least behaviorally—and have a strong direct impact on sustainability outcomes. Employee engagement schemes that have a sustainable dimension have become commonplace, and brands often describe them in their sustainability reports, even without extensive communication. One case of this is provided by Morgan Stanley with its aforementioned giving back program. Premium watchmaker IWC Schaffhausen also strongly invests time and resources in community volunteering and sponsoring, in which employees participate in field actions (e.g., donating food or helping children with disabilities

through events and contests). At IWC Schaffhausen, these actions are barely mentioned in the sustainability report and are not communicated to the wider public. Such modest promotion reinforces the perception of genuine motivations for those internally involved.

5. If done correctly, sustainability storytelling can be transformative for brands

We have proposed four strategic elements for successful sustainability storytelling, which can be referred to as the four A’s: Aim, Actors, Aspiration, and Act. Collectively applying these elements increases authenticity and believability to avoid negative reactions from stakeholders (i.e., washing perceptions). Beyond these four storytelling elements, there must be clear markers of change from status quo to more sustainable action in the plot. Often, a paralysis between intention and actual action exists in sustainable behavior, so the story must show the consequences of one’s actions more prominently than in nonsustainable storytelling. Helping the audience clearly understand, visualize, and measure sustainability impact is critical. Fiat provides such an example by stating that each sale of a (RED) car contributes to its \$4 billion donation to the (RED) cause. Indeed, our propositions rest on the fundamental pillar that companies must act transparently and go further than the storyline if they are to be believed in their claims of sustainability. Customers and other stakeholders must be able to easily verify that the brand is acting on its promise and have a very clear and transparent view of its practices.

In closing, storytelling can represent a powerful tool for sustainability communication. Even anti-sustainable companies—for whom stakeholders’ group motives and agendas inevitably differ ([Clark et al., 2020](#))—or companies recovering from a sustainability-related scandal can benefit from a coherent storytelling approach, as long as the company is genuine in its sustainability claims and motivations.

Appendix 1. Examples and resources*

Company	Idea represented	Link to resource
Walt Disney Company	Stakeholder pressure to take a stance	https://edition.cnn.com/2022/04/15/perspectives/disney-dont-say-gay/index.html
Tesla	Born sustainable	https://www.tesla.com/about
Patagonia	Born sustainable	https://www.patagonia.com/activism/ Michel, G.M., Feori, M., Damhorst, M.L., Lee, Y., Niehm, L.S. (2019) Stories We Wear: Promoting Sustainability Practices with the Case of Patagonia. <i>Family and Consumer Sciences Research Journal</i> , 48(2), 165–180.
Tony's Chocolonely	Born sustainable—start with the “why”: transforming ecosystems or society with sustainability values at the core	https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=FsyxMCCREPs
Innocent	Green washing	https://www.theguardian.com/media/2022/feb/23/innocent-tv-ad-banned-for-claiming-its-drinks-help-environment
Dove	Start with the “why”: highlighting sustainability values	https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=XpaOjMXyJGk Dessart, L., & Pitardi, V. (2019). How stories generate consumer engagement: An exploratory study. <i>Journal of Business Research</i> , 104, 183-195.
Total Energies	Start with the “why”: repositioning toward sustainability	https://totalenergies.com/sustainability
Meta	Start with the “why”: repositioning toward sustainability after a crisis	https://hbr.org/2021/11/facebooks-rebrand-has-a-fundamental-problem
Staples	Engaging internal stakeholders	https://www.staples.com/sbd/cre/noheader/about_us/corporate-responsibility/
Morgan Stanley	Engaging internal stakeholders—use the right media: field activities	https://www.morganstanley.com/about-us/giving-back
EDO Queensland	Engaging internal and external stakeholders	https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=8ULDsc9DpEI https://chuffed.org/project/high-court-climate-case
RED & Fiat	Associate with partners—use the right media: company speeches	https://www.red.org/how-red-works https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=inGgetYTWT https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=j9_upuvzDIY https://www.stellantis.com/content/dam/stellantis-corporate/sustainability/csr-disclosure/fca/fca_2020_sustainability_report.pdf https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=j9_upuvzDIY
Formula E	Associate with partners	https://www.fiaformulae.com/en/discover/sustainability Standaert, W., & Jarvenpaa, S. L. (2016). Formula E: Next Generation Motorsport with

(continued)

Company	Idea represented	Link to resource
		Next Generation Fans. <i>International Conference on Information Systems</i> .
UEFA	Use aspirational contexts	Outraged documentary: https://www.uefa.com/insideuefa/news/0264-11282ebbd861-b794ba761ec1-1000-outraged-football-unites-to-confront-discrimination-in-new-uefa/ https://www.uefa.tv/video/vod/204831
Fandom Forward	Use aspirational contexts	https://fandomforward.org/mission Jenkins, H. (2012). 'Cultural Acupuncture': Fan Activism and the Harry Potter Alliance. In <i>Transformative Works and Fan Activism</i> , 10.
Nike	Use aspirational contexts	https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Sm9r_Zs2z6s
Every can counts	Use the right media: extended reality	https://www.vrsch.com/projects/jede-dose-zaehlt-virtual-reality-game
Philip Morris International	Use the right media: location-based marketing	https://www.pmi.com/media-center/press-releases/press-release-details/?newsId=22656 https://www.worldnoashtray.com/en/litterati/ https://www.litterati.org/
Smart with Food Yuka	Use the right media: mobile apps	https://www.smartwithfood.com/ https://yuka.io/en/
AG Insurance	Use the right media: video	Loneliness campaign: Website: https://allentegeneenzaamheid.be/ Video: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=7eidRepcTuU Educational program: https://edtv.be/nl/themas/eenzaamheid
BASF	Use the right media: innovation tournaments, or cups	https://www.basf.com/global/en/media/news-releases/2016/04/p-16-185.html
IWC Schaffhausen	Use the right media: field activities	https://www.iwc.com/en/company/sustainability-at-iwc.html

*As of July 21, 2022

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