Talking green business: A qualitative study on the use of digital storytelling in sustainability communication to influence corporate success

Blau, Sophia; Giagozidou, Agapi; Klausmeyer, Jule; Saxinger, Fabian; Wettengel, Laura; Winkel, Catherine Danielle

Erstveröffentlichung / Primary Publication
Sammelwerksbeitrag / collection article

Imprint

Disrupt Adapt: New Ways to Deal with Current Challenges in Media and Communication

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Talking Green Business

A Qualitative Study on the Use of
Digital Storytelling in Sustainability Communication to
Influence Corporate Success

Sophia Blau, Agapi Giagozidou, Jule Klausmeyer,
Fabian Saxinger, Laura Wettengel, Catherine Danielle Winkel

Abstract

Sustainability is one of the most urgent and relevant topics today, permeating social and economic spheres alike. Especially corporations are faced with high stakeholder expectations, not least to be economically sustainable. To communicate a firms' efforts on ESG issues, a well-known but still underrated way is storytelling – nowadays mostly digital. Answers to the question how digital storytelling in sustainability communication of profit corporations influences their strategic success are provided within this study by the analysis of qualitative data from 14 semi-structured interviews across different communication practitioners of globally operating companies in Germany. As the study found out, digital storytelling in sustainability communication mainly contributes to intangible success factors, fulfilling its goal to foster an improvement of corporate reputation. The study provides evidence that this could further lead to a significant influence on the creation of tangible values, since even the outflow as the highest level of value creation could be traced back to communicative efforts. The findings contribute to the research on value creation through digital storytelling as a method in sustainability communication. They are the first of their kind that combine those three aspects empirically and stimulate the debate on communicative value creation providing an adaption of the *DPRG/ICV Framework.* Furthermore, the study gives practical implications for corporate communication professionals on the emerging format of storytelling.

Introduction

Awareness has risen sharply in recent years when it comes to environmental problems, which is why the topic of sustainability is progressively being discussed in public (Baar & Ottler, 2020, p. 1). One consequence is that companies are increasingly facing high pressure to justify and legitimize their economic actions (Baran & Kiziloglu, 2018, p. 71). A responsible approach to environmental issues can nowadays be regarded as a basic prerequisite for an organization to maintain a positive public image (Baran & Kiziloglu, 2018, p. 71). To this end, companies are strongly advised to communicate their sustainability efforts to the outside world. However, for sustainability communication to achieve the intended effect, it is necessary for companies to be perceived as credible and trustworthy (Baar & Ottler, 2020, p. 1). If a company fails to position itself as credible with regard to its sustainability activities, it is often accused of greenwashing. Since this can have extensive negative consequences for the company, researchers are increasingly interested in investigating corporate sustainability communication and how to implement it efficiently (Du et al., 2010, p. 17; Huber & Aichberger, 2021, p. 245).

The effectiveness of advertising is rooted in a series of cognitive and affective reactions of the recipients (Fischer et al., 2021, p. 33). Based on this, evidence has been found that the technique of storytelling promotes affective reactions in the form of empathic involvement and thus enables a deep personal connection in relation to sustainability issues (Fischer et al., 2021, p. 33). In addition, there is general consensus that narratives are useful as means of creating persuasive sustainability messages (Coombs & Holladay, 2021, p. 89). When it comes to sustainability communication, research has not yet focused on economic KPIs (Key Performance Indicators) such as increased returns; rather, ideological thinking has been the focus of interest. However, this does not give companies any insight into the economic effectiveness of their communication efforts. While there is sufficient research on the pairwise connections between sustainability communication, digital storytelling, and strategic business success, there is a gap in research on the combination of the three components. Based on the relevance of sustainability in strategic communication, this research paper addresses the question: *To what extent can digital storytelling in sustainability communication influence the strategic success of profit companies?* To this end, a brief overview of the three components and the current state of research regarding a pairwise combination of these will be provided. After the research objective

is succinctly stated, the methodical procedure for the qualitative expert interview is explained. In the following chapter, the results are summarized before they are interpreted in the discussion.

Literature Review

Digital Storytelling

Storytelling as a modern communication concept has multiple definitions. Alexander (2017) explains digital storytelling as the telling of stories using digital technologies (p. 3). However, Fordon (2018) points out that it is not just the use of technology that makes analog storytelling digital, but rather the architecture and structure of the story as well as the media in which the story is told (pp. 35–40). Four elements of narrative patterns are relevant in a story: the message, which has an ideological or moral background and thus reflects the identity of the organization, a conflict, which acts as a driving force, concise characters, and a comprehensible plot line (Fog et al., 2005, p. 32). The achievement of a protagonist's goal might be jeopardized by an occurring or anticipated conflict because this is the engine that drives a story forward with propulsion and tension (Cossart, 2017, p. 105). Other definitions, however, focus more on the effect of storytelling. Huck-Sandhu (2004) mentions that stories must always create relevance for the audience by triggering emotions such as empathy, curiosity, excitement, shock, or even understanding (p. 651). With short narratives, storytelling offers a useful extension for websites, blogs, or social media channels and is accessible globally in unlimited quantities in terms of retrievability, creating an intrinsically networked system and simplifying communication with one another (Grünheck, 2019, p. 23).

Herbst (2014) identifies four specific characteristics of storytelling on digital platforms: integration, availability, networking, and interactivity (p. 119). The focus here is on technical, temporal, media and human elements. Integration is about different digital devices, platforms, services, applications, and media channels, all of which are building blocks of a complex system and are interconnected (Herbst, 2014, p. 119). Furthermore, interconnectivity is understood as the linking of different elements, as hypermedia can be achieved by connecting graphic symbols, videos, audio, images, and text, which interrupts the linear telling of a story (Herbst, 2014, pp. 155–160). The final feature, interactivity, combines technical capabilities and human participation in the story through image galleries, audio slideshows, interactive timelines, or infinity photos (Herbst, 2014, pp. 155–160). These special features

offer new narrative possibilities and deliver a high degree of interconnectedness between recipients and the content to be conveyed.

Digital storytelling takes on various roles and functions in corporate communication and is used for diverse topics in different departments. The various effects of storytelling in corporate communication include: strengthening loyalty to the company, promoting interpersonal communication, giving meaning to events, interpreting the past and describing the future (Thier, 2010, pp. 13–14). Furthermore, some aspects like clarifying corporate culture and change processes, convincing customers and employees of new ideas or products, and facilitating the transfer and storage of knowledge are also important potentials of storytelling (Thier, 2010, pp. 13–14). There are several examples of storytelling as a concept in corporate communication where corporate identities, corporate values and the vision of a company are communicated (Simmons, 2006, p. 17; Faust, 2006, p. 7). Through stories, relevant messages are absorbed and further processed, making digital storytelling the backbone of content management (Sammer, 2017, p. 16). The core elements of strategic communication are persuasive messages, which contribute to long-term engagement with sub-publics (Huck-Sandhu, 2014, p. 651). Persuasive messages embody relevant and interesting content on the one hand, and target group-oriented preparation and communication on the other (Huck-Sandhu, 2014, p. 651). To ensure their success, corporate messages should be systematically planned and managed by ensuring that the individual topics can have a strong anchorage (Huck-Sandhu, 2014, p. 651). The stories should be adapted to the respective topics and channels in a target group-specific manner, and finally, a clear editorial concept for the content is advantageous in order to achieve attention (Aßmann & Röbbeln, 2013, p. 185). Examples of message dissemination would be newsrooms, websites, or even the company's own social media channels. Through storytelling as a corporate message, customers can participate in product development, accompany employees in their daily work, or experience the journey of the product to the customer (Aßmann & Röbbeln, 2013, p. 169). Storytelling is a very effective and popular communication strategy, which is particularly suitable for communicating sustainability efforts in companies. Sustainability communication is a complex and very relevant aspect in this study, which is why more in-depth explanations of sustainability communication in companies are provided below.

Sustainability Communication

With increasing public awareness of the climate crisis, the interest in sustainability in the industrial sector has grown enormously (Baar & Ottler, 2020,

p. 1). A company's success is largely dependent on the acceptance of its stakeholders which is why a responsible approach to the environment is a prerequisite for a positive public image of an organization (Schreyögg & Koch, 2014, p. 36). Therefore, a growing number of corporate communicators care about sustainability (Baran & Kiziloglu, 2018, p. 71; Weder, Krainer et al., 2021, p. vi).

According to the definition of the World Commission on Environment and Development (1987, p. 43), sustainability means acting in such a way that the needs of the present can be met without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs. In this context, environmental sustainability is often placed at the center of the understanding of the term (Ekins et al., 2008, p. 64). In order to capture the full scope of the term, however, this paper draws on the *three-pillar model of sustainability,* which is based on the three dimensions of ecology, economy, and social issues (Brugger, 2010, p. 17). While the ecological dimension relates to the resilience of the environment, the social dimension is based on social justice as a guiding principle (Siebenhüner, 2001, p. 79; Brugger, 2010, p. 18). Lastly, the economic dimension refers to maintaining the viability of an economic community (Brugger, 2010, p. 19). With the growing importance of the concept of sustainability, sustainability communication as a sub-category of corporate communication is receiving more and more attention in research (Godemann & Michelsen, 2011, p. 5). In the context of this paper, the term is to be understood as the corporate communication of sustainability. This means that sustainability communication includes all communication on the part of a company that serves to make the company's commitment to sustainability visible to the outside world (Baar & Ottler, 2020, p. 1).

However, companies walk a fine line: On the one hand, they face stakeholders who want to be informed about the organization's good deeds; on the other hand, these stakeholders also quickly become suspicious if the same organizations advertise their sustainability efforts too obtrusively, which can lead to accusations of greenwashing (Du et al., 2010, p. 17). The term greenwashing refers to misleading activities designed to make a company appear more environmentally friendly than it actually is (Baran & Kiziloglu, 2018, p. 65). In addition, companies have to face challenges that are intrinsic to sustainability communication. These include its complexity as well as dealing with the tension between the short-term orientation of the media and sustainability as a long-term concept.

On the other hand, the concept of sustainability also functions as a kind of moral compass that decides what is good and bad (Weder, Karmasin et al., 2021, p. 1). This is highly beneficial, since studies indicate that stakeholders are increasingly willing to take measures to reward good companies and

punish bad ones (Du et al., 2010, p. 8). If a company's sustainability communication is judged to be credible, it can contribute to a more positive attitude and thus to desirable behaviors on the part of stakeholders towards that company (Du et al., 2010, p. 17). In addition, responsible action can result in an improvement of the corporate image and ultimately lead to the extensive creation of intangible values (Hansen & Schrader, 2005, p. 384). However, if a company's sustainability efforts are not assessed as credible, this can lead to a loss of trust on the part of stakeholders and to negative feedback effects. One possible consequence is the emergence of aforementioned greenwashing accusations, which in turn have a negative impact on the corporate image (Du et al., 2010, p. 17). Both positive and negative effects of a company's efforts towards sustainability communication are not to be underestimated, which is why the following chapter offers a more detailed insight into how strategic corporate success can be driven by communicative activities.

Strategic Corporate Success and the Impact of Corporate Communication

Corporate success describes a desired future state in which the company achieves its goals (Raffée & Fritz, 1997, p. 1214). Tangible success factors (e.g. capital formation) are equally relevant as intangible success factors (e.g. trust; Fombrun, 2007, S. 147). Reputation as an intangible success factor is particularly significant for the strategic orientation of a company, as it influences the behavior of stakeholders towards the company in a "desired way", which in turn has a positive impact on the (financial) success of the company (Raithel & Schwaiger, 2014, p. 237). A good corporate reputation strengthens trust in products or services and advertising claims, reinforces purchasing decisions, and generates competitive advantages (Raithel & Schwaiger, 2014, pp. 234–235; p. 244). Raithel and Schwaiger (2014) have identified four factors that are crucial for corporate reputation: quality (customer market), financial performance (financial market), attractiveness (employment) and responsibility in dealing with society and nature (opinion leader market) (p. 234). Overall, it is clear that a company's profitability increases as its reputation improves and vice versa. Thus, reputation, financial business success, and company value are directly linked (Raithel & Schwaiger, 2014, p. 244). In previous research, sustainability communication, which serves as the fourth reputation factor of Raithel and Schwaiger (2014), is insufficiently addressed in connection with strategic corporate success. With the help of the *German Public Relations Association (DPRG) and the International Controller Association (ICV) Framework* from 2010 (Fig. 1), the intangible success values of sustainability communication are identified and the performance

contribution to corporate success is demonstrated. The framework combines the three following decisive perspectives in the impact stages (Pollmann, 2014):

- Controlling: Identification of (financial) success of the company
- Corporate communication: Communication measures that are intended to provide a contact offer for target groups
- Target groups: Behavioral disposition toward the organization

Bearing this in mind, the impact levels input, output, outcome and outflow are structured in the DPRG/ICV Framework as follows:

Figure 1.
DPRG/ICV Framework.
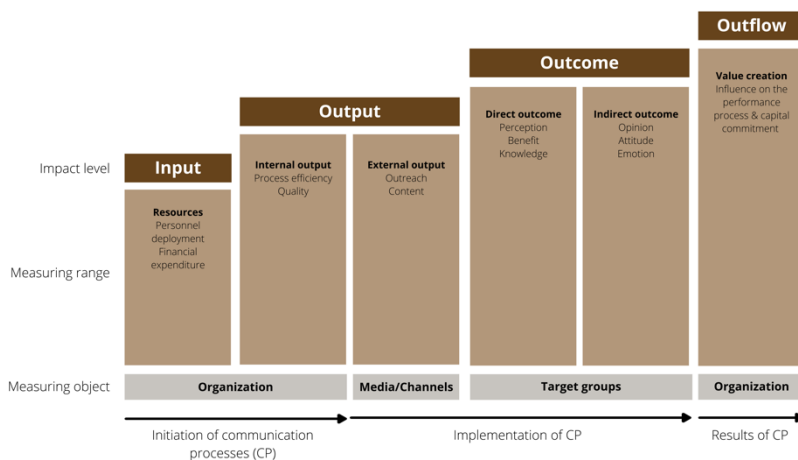
Own depiction according to ICV (2010, p. 35).

The input describes the effort and the outflow the yield of communication processes, while the output represents the provision of content through owned media and earned media (Zerfass et al., 2016, p. 5). The changed opinions, attitudes, and emotions in the indirect outcome turn into acceptance and trust, which strengthens the relationship capital that is essential for corporate activity (Zerfass et al., 2016, p. 6). The *DPRG/ICV Framework* enables a comprehensive evaluation of the results of sustainability communication in conjunction with digital storytelling. A special focus can be placed on the outcome: Through digital storytelling, sustainability communication activates not only the cognitive level via the pure transfer of knowledge, but particularly stimulates the affective level via changing emotions and attitudes (Huck-Sandhu, 2004, p. 651). The extent to which this

has a decisive effect on the outflow and subsequently has an impact on the strategic success is examined in this research.

Empirical Correlation of the Theoretical Constructs

Due to the professionalization of sustainability reporting and the rising interest of investors and customers in the topic, companies are confronted with a growing multitude of expectations: In addition to the mere presentation of their commitment to social responsibility, companies nowadays must provide actual credible evidence of their corporate actions (Chaudhuri, 2014, pp. 132–133). Authentic photos, videos, and dialogues with relevant stakeholders are more important than ever for the acceptance and transparency of companies as perceived by stakeholders, which in turn strengthen their reputation and secure their *license to operate* (Chaudhuri, 2014, pp. 132–133). Furthermore, the consumption of news by stakeholders is shifting more and more to the internet, especially towards social media. The use of digital storytelling can support companies in conveying their sustainability communication in an interactive way in this multimedia environment, while at the same time reducing the complexity of the topic for recipients (Chaudhuri, 2014, pp. 132–137). In addition, storytelling can help increase the persuasive potential of sustainability communication (Coombs & Holladay, 2021, pp. 100–101) and get users excited about its messages (Araujo & Kollat, 2018, pp. 427–428). Compared to other forms of communication, storytelling takes recipients on a journey; stories can be designed in a more appealing way and thus have a higher authenticity. It is important here that a clear strategy is recognizable and integrated on different levels and channels.

Since the application of digital storytelling in sustainability communication includes influencing a company's reputation and securing its legitimacy, important correlations can also be detected here. There is agreement that storytelling can not only support relationship management (Nicoli et al., 2021, pp. 168–169) but also convince customers to purchase e.g., commercial products with the effect that companies can increase their sales rate (van Laer et al., 2019 p. 135; González Romo et al., 2017, pp. 145–147). Further, digital storytelling can also be important for employer branding, because recipients, who have viewed stories, describe companies more positively (Crișan & Borțun, 2017, pp. 284–285). According to the current state of research, digital storytelling can have an impact on the intangible success factors of companies. For this purpose, the stories should be as appealing and authentic as possible, otherwise this can damage a company's reputation.

Nowadays, corporate sustainability communication is indispensable for a company. However, aside from all the social projects and appealing images

shown by the company, sustainability communication also poses risks. One challenge in particular is to appear authentic in order to prevent being accused of greenwashing (Brugger, 2010, p. 97). Regarding the strategic level of a company, it is essential for corporate communication to increase the credibility of the company and to build a positive image and therefore reputation. Thus, corporate communication can make an important contribution to value creation in the area of sustainability communication (Brugger, 2010, pp. 101–103).

However, previous research has mainly focused on marketing and therefore has not yet investigated the influence of the combination of sustainability communication and digital storytelling on strategic corporate success. Therefore, this paper aims to contribute to closing this research gap. Many studies have been conducted so far to investigate the influence of digital storytelling in sustainability communication with the help of content analysis and interviews, but these tend to utilize quantitative methods. Thus, by conducting qualitative interviews and subsequent content analysis of globally operating, cross-industry companies, we can provide a detailed insight into practice.

Methodology

Our research project employs qualitative expert interviews with communication practitioners in corporate sustainability communication to openly explore the to date unresearched combination of our three research fields. The explorative research design serves to answer the main research question: *To what extend can digital storytelling in sustainability communication influence the strategic success of profit companies?* In total, 14 semi-structured interviews with communication professionals of German companies were conducted that put a focus on

- *Content design*,
- *Methodical implementation*, and
- *Value creation*

of digital storytelling in sustainability communication and aim to answer the three corresponding subordinate research questions:

RQ1: *How do profit companies shape digital storytelling in sustainability communication from a content perspective?*
RQ2: *How is the preparation of digital storytelling methodically implemented in the sustainability communication of profit companies?*
RQ3: *What strategic successes are being pursued and achieved with the use of digital storytelling in the sustainability communication of profit companies?*

Building on the considerations of the first two focus fields, more holistic reflections on the value creation as the main research interest of this study can be made. Due to the partially standardized research method, the outcome is not limited by presuppositions and further leaves open the possibility of a priori disregarded but possible results (Gläser & Laudel, 2010, pp. 38–43). In this study, the research interest was placed exclusively on the companies' point of view since this view is the most important one when it comes to strategic success of companies. However, the goal of this research was to increase the variance of the answers as much as possible in order to get a broad picture of the target group. Thus, questioning corporate communicators seemed suitable since their numerous and frequent touchpoints with digital storytelling in their daily work accredit them as highly informative experts on the topic.

The target group consists of global profit companies which use digital storytelling in sustainability communication. The sample criterion was defined by the strength of sales. By applying this discriminating characteristic to the research population (the strongest companies on sales were selected), a high level of societal awareness on these companies as well as a certain expectation of society in regard to sustainable corporate action can be assumed. As a basis for selection, the list of the "Fortune Global 500" from 2020, which represents the global top 500 companies with the highest sales in the world per fiscal year (Fortune, 2021), was combined with the list of the 100 largest (highest sales) companies in Germany (Boerse.de, 2018). From this, excluding companies that don't conduct sustainability communication on digital channels at least partially with storytelling, narrows down the maximum sample size further. The final sample includes communicators who were employed in the communication departments of the target companies, had a strategic background in the field of sustainability communication, and had dealt with digital storytelling in their work activities at that time. Further, it shows a high degree of heterogeneity as far as the diversity of the companies' industries is concerned.

The survey was conducted with a semi-structured guideline of open questions. This predefined, systematic specification of the interview procedure follows the principle of maximum openness (Helfferich, 2019, pp. 672–675), while still permitting a high degree of flexibility to deepen the interviews emergently in case of unforeseen, but interesting aspects. The interview guideline is constructed in accordance with the three previously mentioned focus fields of the study in three corresponding and methodically operationalized question blocks. Beginning with clarifying definitions of digital storytelling, sustainability communication, and strategic corporate success and one opening question, the first question block then commences the research

content-related questions. First, the focus is on content design of sustainability topics addressed by the companies, their criteria for topic selection and the different aspects that characterize the topics or stories. The second block is devoted to research focus two, concerning the methodical implementation of digital storytelling in sustainability communication. There, the channels used by the companies, the forms and elements of presentation, the recognizability of a sender and the involvement of external service providers are queried. To accomplish the initial research interest of this study to explore the company's success contributions made by digital storytelling in sustainability communication, the third guideline block contains questions about the companies' success criteria in general and in particular those of digital storytelling. In addition, the added value of the combination of digital storytelling and sustainability communication in comparison to other forms of communication as well as possible risks are queried. Lastly, the interviewees were asked to give an outlook on future developments in the field of digital storytelling in sustainability communication.

The survey period extended over seven weeks from December 2021 to February 2022. N = 14 communicators were interviewed after a recruitment either via email using a pre-written sample letter or telephone. The interviews took place as virtual video interviews and lasted between 33 and 67 minutes. Restrictively, the interviews solely provide analytical representativeness for the target groups. For the systematic evaluation of the interview transcripts, we conducted a qualitative content analysis in accordance with Mayring and Fenzl (2019), following a theory-based category system (Table 1) with coding guide. Executing an inductive-deductive process, the main categories were derived from the subordinate research questions while the subcategories were derived from the guideline questions. Both were emergently augmented during the evaluation when reasonable categories came up.

Table 1.
Category system with main categories and subcategories.

Main categories	Subcategories
Content design	Topics
	Prioritization
	Selection criteria
	Story characteristics
Methodical implementation	Channels
	Elements
	Sender
	Resource allocation
Value creation	Overall corporate success criteria
	Success contribution of digital storytelling

Value added
Risks

Outlook

Results

Content Design

The evaluation of the results is based on the three overarching research fields. In the interviews with the corporate communicators, the triad of ecology, social issues and economics is again evident in terms of thematic orientation, with economic issues being weighted the least. Content on ecological topics is considered to be the "*traditional focus topic*", followed by social topics as the second "*very clear focus topic*". Here, the focus for ecological goals is on decarbonization, environmental protection, resource efficiency and circular economy. When it comes to social issues, the focus lies primarily on community engagement, diversity and equal opportunities. On the economic pillar of sustainability, the majority of corporate communicators choose topics such as governance, supply chains and compliance. Moreover, it is the target groups – internal and external – that are seen as the most decisive selection criterion. The content of the stories depends on the stakeholders and recipients, but also on its relevance for the media and the public. Socio-political trends are also identified as a predominant criterion. According to the respondents, the choice of topic – and the timing – is influenced by current social challenges as well as political or economic trends. Moving on to story characteristics, the results show that companies communicate mainly in personalized stories with protagonists as a centerpiece of digital storytelling. However, there are also many companies that rely on a mixture of events and people. Most respondents report striving for a balance of emotional appeal and factual explanations, with different emphases in the weighting of each. The interviewees also share this heterogeneous picture regarding channel-specific differences. In contrast, there is unanimity in the sample with regard to the realism of the stories. Here, the interviewees mentioned almost exclusively real stories with "*always real people*".

Methodical Implementation

In the context of the methodical implementation of storytelling, the results are summarized in terms of communication channels, design elements, sender selection and resource allocation. The communication channels refer to the digital distribution channels chosen by the companies, while the

design elements include digital artifacts such as images, text, audio, video, and multimedia combinations. In regard to communication channels, all interviewees recognize social media as the most important distribution channel for digital storytelling in sustainability communication. The most frequently mentioned platforms are Twitter, LinkedIn, Facebook, Instagram and YouTube. The focus on social media is justified by the multiple strengths of the platforms: Most respondents agree that interactivity in particular is a key decision criterion for selecting a particular channel for stories in sustainability communication. The promotion of dialog and engagement plays an essential role in this context. In addition to interactivity, it is primarily the variety of design options that makes social media a popular communication channel for digital storytelling in sustainability communication. Besides social media, almost all interviewees named their company's own website as an important distribution channel for digital sustainability stories. Some interviewees described the website as a centralized communication channel that acts as a link between all other channels, using terms such as "*hub*" and "*main stage*". Regarding the selection of digital artifacts for the construction of digital stories in sustainability communication, almost all interviewees emphasized the relevance of variety, which could be created by the combination of all available elements as well as through multimedia linking. However, videos and images were mentioned especially insistently. The latter should above all be attention-grabbing, expressive, and authentic. According to many interviewees, however, texts continue to play an important role, and the sender of digital stories in sustainability communication is always the company itself. How superficial this is, however, varies: Many stated that they often put employees at the center of their stories and make them the storytellers. In these cases, the company can still be recognized as the sender, but not as obviously as the employee. According to almost all respondents, the resource allocation for planning and implementing digital stories in sustainability communication is primarily internal. It is also striking that many companies already have their own people or teams responsible for the company's sustainability communication.

Value Creation

Finally, the following results section is devoted to the value creation potential of digital storytelling in sustainability communication in relation to strategic corporate success. Looking at the respondents' assessments, it is striking that the value-contributive effect is being noticed predominantly on the intangible side. Statements such as "*with our sustainability communication we definitely cannot [...] generate more money*" or "*this is not something we do to make money*" make this unmistakably clear. On the side of intangible

success criteria, most interviewees agree that digital storytelling in sustainability communication contributes to enhancing the company's reputation and image, increasing general reach, improving customer satisfaction and orientation, and building trust (Fig. 2). In addition, positive influences can be noted concerning the attitudes and behavior of investors, the target group's perception of sustainability as well as the company's acceptance of responsibility, the attractiveness as an employer, and the positioning of the company. Apart from the aforementioned success criteria, the interviewees also saw strengths of digital storytelling in the promotion of commitment, in the cultivation of relationships with stakeholders, and in the effective communication of information. It offers vital added value compared to other communication tools and forms of presentation, especially in terms of conveying information: Sustainability communication can be much more effective in the storytelling format, as complex issues in particular can be presented in a much more comprehensible and simple manner. Overall, most respondents rated the design options in digital storytelling as significantly more varied, resulting in content that is more innovative, exciting and interesting than content in other forms of presentation such as a simple report or press release. In addition, stories are much more tangible and interactive for recipients, and messages are therefore communicated more efficiently. Digital storytelling was also frequently cited as a means of addressing target groups more effectively. Another strength of digital storytelling is that it can achieve a high level of awareness of the significance and importance of sustainability among target groups. But the sustainability commitment of the companies themselves can also be communicated particularly well through digital stories. Overall, digital storytelling can achieve a greater reach in sustainability communication than other forms of presentation, both in quantity and quality – even beyond existing target groups.

Figure 2.

Contribution of digital storytelling in sustainability communication to corporate success criteria, graded by frequency of mention by the interviewees.
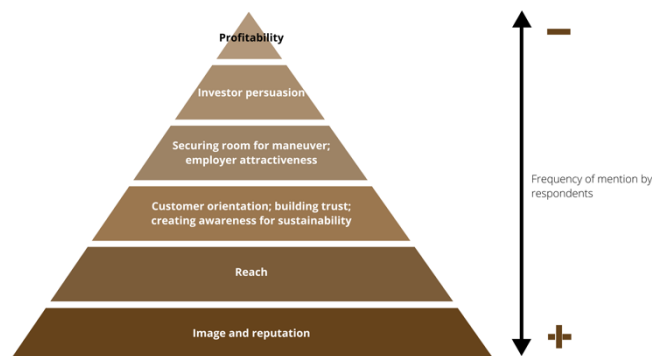
Own depiction.

In addition to the many potentials that digital storytelling holds for sustainability communication, this form of presentation also entails various risks. The most frequently mentioned risks are the potential loss of credibility and greenwashing, which are in some ways closely related. Digital storytelling can quickly take a hazardous direction in which many facts are not depicted completely truthfully and are romanticized. In this context, the interviewees also reported a lack of factual relevance due to purely emotionalized presentations. At worst, this could end in "*blind actionism*". Many interviewees pointed out that digital stories in sustainability communication can easily become mere advertising campaigns with no added social value: "*You create noise, you have the feeling that you have done something, but the question is how much of it really sticks*". The many opportunities for interaction that social media in particular holds are also associated with more potential for discussion, more diverse opinions, and thus also with significantly higher potential for escalation like on short news or reports. Digital stories are very fast-paced, especially in social media, so that they are not suitable to provide a detailed overview about a subject as an essential basis for long-term topics. Another danger is the potential lack of a link to corporate strategy. A "*one-hit wonder*", as one interviewee said, without a feasible connection to other areas of the company could not add any value. Another risk mentioned was the perceived loss of professionalism due to a lack of necessary skills to develop such elaborate communication formats. It was also pointed out that some target groups cannot be reached by digital storytelling.

Discussion

Based on the core findings on content design, methodical implementation and value creation of digital storytelling, the three subordinate research questions of this study can be answered as follows:

- *Content design* (RQ1): With a clear focus on ecological and social topics, companies develop stories that relate to socially relevant, real events and are told by strong characters as protagonists. A balance is created between emotionality and factual reference.
- *Methodical implementation* (RQ2): Digital stories in sustainability communication are preferably constructed with internal resources as well as highly multimedia and are primarily disseminated via social media channels and the company's own website as the central link between the channels. In doing so, the companies position themselves clearly and distinctly as the senders of their stories.
- *Value creation* (RQ3): Due to the outstanding potential of storytelling in sustainability communication for generating reach, promoting perception and imparting knowledge, excellent conditions are created for the development of a positive reputation as a decisive factor for the success of a company. Also, due to special positioning potential, digital storytelling in sustainability communication is an efficient format to positively influence corporate reputation. The outstanding relevance of sustainability for a company's reputation makes digital storytelling in sustainability communication an efficient tool for creating intangible values that ultimately promote building tangible values.

The results overlap in many respects with the findings of previous academic work already referred to in the literature review. Both the interviewees in this study and existing literature predominantly mention ecological aspects when talking about sustainability. The reason why ecological topics seem to be the most important can be explained by looking at the main criteria for selecting topics for digital storytelling in sustainability communication: According to the interviewees and previous literature, target group interest and general social trends are particularly decisive factors. Environmental and climate protection is one of today's trend-setting social subjects and thus also the first choice as a topic for corporate communication in order to ensure public acceptance and legitimization. As a consequence, sustainability earns a firm place in the corporate strategy of many organizations and also exerts a strong influence on the choice of topics from there. The target group orientation also seems to have an impact on the chosen story characteristics: According to the respondents, most stories are characterized by a clear reference to reality and a high degree of personalization. Based on the

presumption that the lives of target groups are primarily determined by real events and less by fiction, it can be assumed that a reference to reality can generate high attention rates and thus also reach. As well as in science, personalization in the form of concise characters and heroic approaches is considered one of the most important attributes of a successful story. According to the interviewees, the combination of emotionality with factual reference is essential within digital stories in sustainability communication. Complex topics such as sustainability can be communicated in a very understandable manner in this way. The literature also confirms that emotional contexts can have a positive influence on attention and information processing. Thus, the assumption remains that digital storytelling in sustainability communication promotes high attention and reach as well as information processing of recipients, especially when real, ecologically relevant and personalized events are addressed in an emotional and factual way.

Social media was named by interviewees as the most important distribution channel due to characteristics such as interactivity, dialogue and freedom of design. The corporate website with its own sustainability sections as well as structured and detailed information was attributed the function of a central link between all communication channels. Previous scientific findings agree with the high importance of interactivity for the dissemination of digital stories: This increases the readiness for dialogue as well as engagement and thus also the degree of attention of recipients. With regard to the role of the website, the literature also recognizes the centrality of this channel as the most frequent point of contact for information procurement. Thus, it can be assumed that a combination of social media and website communication is needed to efficiently communicate a company's sustainability commitment to stakeholders on a holistic level. This is because a close connection to target groups can be created through high interactivity and detailed information provision. In line with the scientifically recognized fact that digital storytelling has proven to be a particularly suitable format for a pronounced multimedia and design diversity, the interviewees describe the combination of all available elements such as images, video, audio as well as text as indispensable to ensure variety. A special focus is placed on attention-grabbing, expressive and authentic images, video footage as well as (interactive) information graphics to convey more complex issues. This focus appears to be due to the described link between emotionality and objectivity: Expressive images strongly appeal to the emotions of the recipient, while information graphics ensure understanding. It is scientifically recognized that both formats promote interactivity. Thus, it can be assumed that this combination ensures high attention and efficient knowledge transfer.

The clear positioning of the companies surveyed as senders of digital stories in sustainability communication can also be scientifically substantiated: Storytelling is an effective means of transporting the identity, values, goals and visions of companies to the outside world. It is therefore conceivable that stakeholders associate the central goals and values of a company much more directly with sustainability. At this point, it should be noted that the combination of social media and website as distribution channels, as well as the clear positioning of the company as the sender of the stories, establishes sustainability as a fixed component of the corporate identity in the perception of target groups.

Finally, a primary objective of this research concern is to highlight the potential value contribution of digital storytelling in sustainability communication to strategic corporate success. Like previous literature, the interviewees see this contribution primarily on the intangible side. According to the respondents, a particular added value of digital storytelling in sustainability communication compared to other communication formats lies above all in the following:
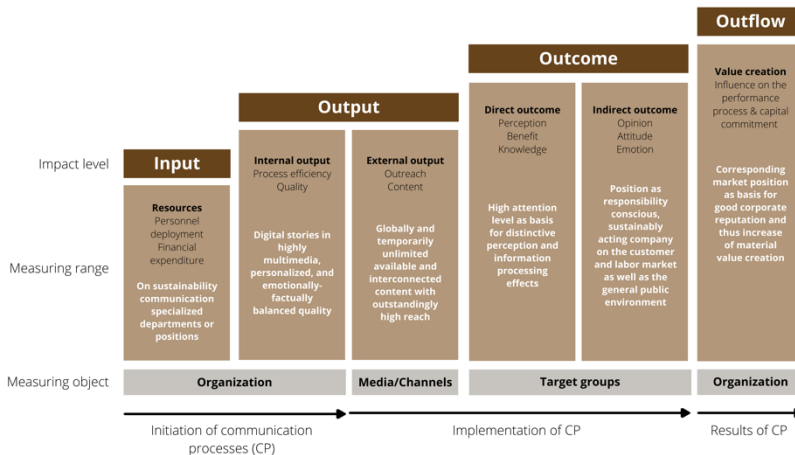
- the outstanding potential for generating attention, conveying knowledge, and increasing interaction,
- the positioning potential in terms of corporate identity, values, goals, and vision,
- the design variety and liveliness of the content,
- the higher reach,
- the effective promotion of the awareness of target groups for the importance and relevance of sustainability and for the sustainability management of the company.

In the next step, this added value is to be linked to company-specific goals that are connected to tangible and intangible success factors and whose achievement determines the strategic success of the company. The *DPRG/ICV Framework* illustrates how immaterial and material value contributions systematically build on each other to contribute to corporate success. At the input level, it is now known that primarily internal human resources are used for digital storytelling in sustainability communication. On the output level, it is evident that these digital stories are characterized by extraordinary multimediality, an emotional, factual and personalized character. Finally, the prerequisite for successful communication processes is the level of external output with a focus on the range of communication content. Digital storytelling is characterized by an excellent reach potential, especially due to the characteristic interactivity as well as the global and temporally unlimited availability and high degree of networking of digital channels. This forms the foundation for the level of direct outcomes with a focus on the

perception and knowledge of recipients: Due to the social relevance of the topic of sustainability in combination with the characteristic emotionality, interactivity and multimedia nature of the format, a high level of attention and activity on the part of the recipients can be expected. This forms an extremely advantageous basis for the transfer of knowledge, which in turn builds on the level of the indirect outcome. Focusing on the influence of communication activities on opinions, attitudes and emotions, the level of indirect outcome represents the decisive success factor of corporate reputation. Corporate reputation is formed above all on customer, capital and labor markets as well as in general public society. It has already been explained how sustainability can be anchored in the corporate identity through digital storytelling. In this context, it can be scientifically substantiated that storytelling formats create convincing product-related content for customers, can have a positive effect on the employer image as well as on the image in the general public environment. On this basis, it can be assumed that digital storytelling in sustainability communication is an effective tool for linking the services of a company most convincingly with sustainable quality. Thus, companies can use the storytelling format to position themselves on the customer and labor market as well as in the general public environment as a sustainable company with a special sense of responsibility for society and the environment. The positioning on the financial market, on the other hand, remains less clear, as economic issues play a subordinate role. Ultimately, this positioning or reputation building leads to the last level of outflow: With a good corporate reputation, material values such as profitability and return on investment can demonstrably increase. This is expressed above all in strengthened trust, higher product preference and decisive purchasing behavior on the part of the stakeholders. Figure 3 once again presents the *DPRG/ICV Framework* in an updated form: The additions written in white summarize the findings and derivations presented in this chapter on the value creation contribution of digital storytelling in sustainability communication in a concise form.

Figure 3.

Value contribution through digital storytelling in sustainability communication.

Impact level	Input	Output		Outcome		Outflow
		Internal output Process efficiency Quality	**External output** Outreach Content	**Direct outcome** Perception Benefit Knowledge	**Indirect outcome** Opinion Attitude Emotion	**Value creation** Influence on the performance process & capital commitment
Measuring range	**Resources** Personnel deployment Financial expenditure On sustainability communication specialized departments or positions	Digital stories in highly multimedia, personalized, and emotionally-factually balanced quality	Globally and temporally unlimited available and interconnected content with outstandingly high reach	High attention level as basis for distinctive perception and information processing effects	Position as responsibility conscious, sustainably acting company on the customer and labor market as well as the general public environment	Corresponding market position as basis for good corporate reputation and thus increase of material value creation
Measuring object	**Organization**		**Media/Channels**	**Target groups**		**Organization**

Initiation of communication processes (CP) → Implementation of CP → Results of CP

Own depiction adapted from ICV (2010, p. 35).

The value contribution of digital storytelling in sustainability communication is nevertheless limited by various risk factors. According to the interviewees, these lie especially in the loss of credibility in connection with greenwashing as well as in the over-emotionalization and neglect of facts. The danger of losing credibility in the context of greenwashing is also frequently emphasized in the literature. The insistence on sustainable action can, under certain conditions, trigger mistrust instead of trust, especially in view of the fact that financial goals usually have the highest priority in the for-profit sector. It can be assumed that companies will lose credibility if the advertising intention is pursued rather than added social value. It is also interesting that the greatest strength of digital storytelling – interactivity – is also rated as one of the greatest risk factors: The more intense the interactivity, the higher the interviewees rate the potential for escalation. This is partly due to the fact that they attribute a high potential for conflict to the topic of sustainability per se. However, this should not only be seen as a risk factor, but above all as an opportunity: It is known from previous literature that conflict is one of the decisive characteristics of a good story. It is considered a driver of tension and thus attraction. In this respect, the professional handling of conflicts is always also a means of influencing attention.

Despite the risk factors of the digital storytelling format in sustainability communication mentioned in the previous chapter, the most important derivations from the three areas of content design, methodical implementation and

value creation of digital storytelling in sustainability communication are to be combined in the following to form a final judgement. The following answer to the research-guiding question is therefore formulated: Digital storytelling in sustainability communication makes a major contribution to intangible value creation in profit companies. The combination of the enormously attention-grabbing digital storytelling format with the particularly socially relevant topic of sustainability leads to extraordinarily influential reach, perception and information processing effects. These greatly promote the development of a positive corporate reputation. Consequently, digital storytelling in sustainability communication can also have a decisive influence on material value creation. Content-related prerequisites for the release of these potentials are story characteristics such as the focus on real, socially relevant sustainability topics, the personalization through characterful and authentic protagonists, as well as the balance between emotionality and factual reference. From a methodical perspective, the use of internal resources to create high level multimedia content, the distribution via social media channels and corporate websites as well as the clear positioning of companies as senders can be seen as prerequisites for the potential value creation through digital storytelling in sustainability communication.

The results presented previously are accompanied by a number of limitations. Firstly, it must be remembered that this is a qualitative study that cannot be generalized – in order to make generally valid statements, quantitative follow-up research is recommended. In addition, the selection of interviewees only allows conclusions to be drawn about the company's perspective, but not about the perspective of customers or investors, for example. Furthermore, it can be assumed that the interviewees are biased since the measures to be evaluated are products of their own work. It is therefore to be expected that the added value of these products tends to be overestimated rather than underestimated. A further limitation results from the fact that only communication managers from the German-speaking market have been interviewed, which is why no conclusions can be drawn about possible cultural, political or geographic differences. Moreover, the main areas of activity of the participants in this study are very different, which limits the comparability of the results. Another aspect that makes it difficult to compare the results is the fact that the companies are at different stages of development with regard to the implementation of digital storytelling in sustainability communication. As a result, existing potentials can only be exploited to varying degrees, even if the relevance of their use has already been recognized. In conclusion, despite all its limitations, the study not only provides valuable insights into the field of digital storytelling as a corporate success factor, but also offers a solid basis for follow-up research with different focal points.

This study makes a noteworthy contribution to research and practice: Current scholarship so far offers many insights into digital storytelling, sustainability communication, and strategic business success. However, to our current knowledge, our study is the first of its kind which systematically links these three theoretical constructs to reveal interrelationships and interlocking modes of action. Moreover, digital storytelling has so far been studied primarily in the context of marketing concerns. With sustainability communication as part of corporate communication, a big step has been taken into the direction of investigating digital storytelling in other company-specific communication contexts. This study, thus, opens up great potential for follow-up research in the area of corporate communication, since digital storytelling is not only useful in sustainability communication but in other fields of corporate communication and therefore worth researching.

For profit companies – especially for communication departments and managers –, this paper yields several recommendations for action. First, we have shown that digital storytelling is a great guarantor of success for companies to authentically communicate their actions regarding sustainability to the public. This in turn supports the corporate reputation, which is existential for the marketability of a company. In this study, we could show that the internal human and financial resources expenses for digital storytelling seem to pay off. In addition, we found out that employees have specific skills in order to apply storytelling on different channels and formats. Considering the fact that the storytelling format still plays a minor role in the sustainability communication of many companies, this is an extremely relevant finding for practice. Therefore, this study suggests companies to invest more into digital storytelling in sustainability communication, because it pays off for them, especially due to its tremendous positive influence on corporate reputation. Aßmann and Röbbeln (2013) also mentioned potentials of storytelling regarding customers participating in product development, accompanying employees in their daily work or the journey experience from product to customer. These statements we could not confirm in our study as it was not our focus of research but would be interesting to examine in further research.

Conclusion

With this study, we were able to gain new insights for research and practice of digital sustainability communication, since the combination of the three theoretical constructs of digital storytelling, sustainability communication, and strategic corporate success has not been researched sufficiently to date. For profit companies, in particular for communication departments and communication managers, the study results in a number of

recommendations for action. For example, digital storytelling is an efficient tool for authentically presenting a company's commitment to sustainability to the outside world. This is especially relevant, because companies are under increasing pressure to justify their economic activities with a sustainable orientation. Sustainability is nowadays a prerequisite for a good corporate reputation, which in turn is existential for a company's marketability. The resource expenditure for digital storytelling pays off in this context, as the corporate reputation is positively influenced. This is a relevant finding for practice, as digital storytelling is not (yet) used by many companies in sustainability communication.

Modern communication technologies are developing just as rapidly as social trends and key topics. New communication technologies themselves have a major influence on socially relevant topics because it is only through them that these are disseminated and weighted independently of space and time. Companies as actors in the midst of society are therefore advised to move forward with these developments and to continuously develop their own competencies in order to meet society's expectations, thereby promoting reputation and ensuring corporate success. Accordingly, it can be assumed that sustainability topics will be permanently on the agenda in the future. Digital storytelling is a useful tool for reaching target groups and achieving desired effects with them.

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