

The value of a good story in priceless: How does a brand create history by communicating their sustainability through storytelling in a trustworthy way.

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THE VALUE OF A GOOD STORY IS PRICELESS:

**HOW DOES A BRAND CREATE HISTORY BY COMMUNICATING
THEIR SUSTAINIBILTY THROUGH STORYTELLING IN A
TRUSTWORTHY WAY.**

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1 Introduction

1.1 Research background and motivation

In our interconnected world, driven by technological advances and the widespread use of the internet, consumers now have remarkable access to a variety of information sources. This transformation has elevated consumer awareness and knowledge to unprecedented levels (Global Web Index, 2021), while also giving them more options and the freedom to align decisions with personal preferences (Fog, Budtz, & Yakaboylu, 2005). This shift has important implications, especially regarding how consumers view corporate social responsibility, which involves protecting economic interests, maintaining ecological balance, and promoting social fairness.

Within this modern context, sustainable companies face the challenge of establishing strong connections and trust with consumers. The need to stand out has become crucial, as consumers can better understand tailored messages due to the many available options (Wang & Sun, 2016).

Furthermore, the growth of communication channels, as seen in the accessibility of various information sources (Ji, Shaoming, & Hui, 2019), offers opportunities for businesses to engage in effective marketing. However, this abundance of information has also led consumers to be more selective in their choices, especially when evaluating sustainability-related content (Dessart & Standaert, 2023). This becomes particularly crucial when companies either excessively emphasize or inadequately address their sustainability efforts. In such cases, companies expose themselves to potential accusations of greenwashing (Bazillier & Vauday, 2010; Zandén & Hansson, 2016), which refers to the deceptive presentation of environmental claims.

In response, businesses must rethink how they connect with their target audiences. Evidence shows that storytelling through narrative advertisements is effective in creating emotional connections with consumers compared to non-narrative approaches (Escalas & Stren, 2003). These narratives increase consumer engagement with brands and foster a sense of community and commitment (Evans & Moutinho, 2016; Peale, 1898).

Highlighting the power of storytelling, personal connections and conversations play a key role in shaping individual perceptions. People naturally relate information to their personal experiences, seeking narratives with shared goals, actions, and outcomes (Escalas, 2004). This widespread preference for narratives underscores the potential of using storytelling to establish deep connections and evoke emotions.

Given this backdrop, this research is driven by the aim to understand the relationship between storytelling, sustainability, and brand trust. By uncovering these dynamics, this study seeks to offer practical insights that can guide strategic efforts, allowing businesses to genuinely connect with consumers, build trust, and shape a positive perception of their brand.

1.2 The problem statement

The aim of this research project is to deeply understand the effective use of storytelling as a powerful mean to convey messages of sustainability in a genuine and trustworthy manner. The study focuses on uncovering the art of storytelling, an age-old tradition (Herskovitz & Crystal, 2010) that continues to hold significant influence, especially in today's brand communication landscape.

In our current era, where concerns about the environment and ethics have gained prominence, storytelling plays a crucial role. Consequently, brands have employed storytelling as a strategic tool to create meaningful connections with their audience. This study examines how well-known brands, expertly employ sustainable storytelling to create narratives that resonate with consumers, evoke emotions (Escalas & Stren, 2003), drive engagement, inspire action (Denning, 2005), and build a foundation of trust (Ji, Shaoming, & Hui, 2019).

An essential aspect of this research is the careful analysis of the relationship between storytelling and sustainability. By closely examining the specific contexts in which sustainable stories are told, the study aims to reveal how these contexts influence the establishment of trust in a brand. Additionally, the research seeks to examine the factors that may mediate the link between sustainable storytelling and brand trust.

One of the potential mediators identified is perceived transparency, which reflects a brand's sincerity and openness in conveying its commitment to sustainability (Zandén & Hansson, 2016). Simultaneously, the emotional connection forged with characters within narratives plays another crucial role (Lawrence, Shaw, Baker, Baron-Cohen, & David, 2004). Additionally, the research aims to examine how crafting narratives with authenticity and realism (Dessart & Pitardi, 2019; Van Iersel, De Ruyter, Visconti, & Wetzels, 2014) strengthens the bridge between sustainable storytelling and brand trust.

In essence, the study will investigate how the context used to deliver a sustainable story can affect brand trust. Additionally, the present work will examine the potential mediating role of perceived transparency, empathy towards the characters and perceived verisimilitude in connecting the two key components of sustainable storytelling and brand trust.

1.3 Purpose and Contribution

The core objective of this research is to understand how companies can proficiently convey their commitment to sustainability. Central to this research is the examination of storytelling as a crucial means through which a brand's sustainability values and practices can be effectively communicated to resonate with consumers and establish trust (Ji, Shaoming, & Hui, 2019).

The value of this research lies in its potential contribution to assisting brands in adeptly communicating their sustainability initiatives in a credible manner to their customers.

The value of this research rests on clarifying the storytelling techniques that excel in forging emotional connections with consumers (Escalas & Stren, 2003) and fostering trust in a brand's assertions regarding sustainability (Tan, Sadiq, Bashir, Mahmood, & Rasool, 2022).

The spotlight on storytelling as a crucial element emphasizes its role not only in emotional bonds with consumers and communicating a brand's core values and mission but also in setting apart sustainable

enterprises from competitors, thus establishing a competitive advantage (Sutanto, Kandampully, & Raharjo, 2017).

By achieving these goals, this research has the potential to refine companies' strategies in communicating their sustainability initiatives, thereby cultivating heightened trust among their consumers. Through its insights and findings, this study aspires to equip companies with the necessary tools to navigate the landscape of sustainable communication. In doing so, the companies would make a meaningful contribution to the broader conversation on the potential of storytelling to stimulate positive change.

1.4 Approach

As stated above, the objective of this research is to attain a profound comprehension of how storytelling can effectively convey messages about sustainability in a reliable and trustworthy manner. This objective will be pursued through an examination of the existing literature on storytelling, brand trust, and sustainable communication.

The interaction of both my theoretical background and the literature review will be skillfully linked to create a coherent and clear framework for my research model.

To empirically test this research model, a quantitative research approach will be employed, utilizing an online survey as the primary data collection method. In order to distinctly differentiate between two contextual scenarios, a between-subjects experimental design will be employed. In this arrangement, one group of participants will be exposed to a video of "high condition", while another group will view a different video of "low condition". The subsequent analysis will determine whether these exposures influence participants' perceptions of brand trust.

The questionnaire design will be elaborated upon in subsequent sections, highlighting the considerations taken into account during its construction. Data gathered using this online survey will then be analyzed and the results will be interpreted and discussed upon.

Finally, the theoretical and managerial implications derived from the findings will be outlined, providing actionable insights for real-world application. Finally, recommendations for further research will be put forth, guiding future investigations in this field.

2 Literature review

2.1 The concept of Storytelling

When we interact with new people, we naturally try to have conversations to understand them better. Moreover, we pay attention to their thoughts, perspectives, and beliefs. This applies whether we are making friends, forming romantic relationships, or building professional connections. The common thread is our search for people who share similar preferences and beliefs. Therefore, as we listen to their life stories, whether from the past or recent events, we also share our own stories to give meaning to our experiences (Gottschall, 2012). This mutual exchange aims to create a connection that links our emotions with theirs.

The role of stories in our lives is meaningful. They shape our sense of self and help us make sense of our encounters (Shankar, Askawa, & Taylor, 2001). Moreover, stories provide a framework for understanding the world and allow us to connect with others by finding common ground in the stories we encounter. Through storytelling, we convey messages that enable our audience to find meaning and insights into different aspects of life (Fog, Budtz, & Yakaboylu, 2005).

Crafting a compelling story aims to achieve balance and harmony. Humans naturally seek balance and strive to restore it when disrupted. Reflecting on this, Fog, Budtz, & Yakaboylu (2005) suggest that a well-constructed story aligns with this human perspective by focusing on struggles and their resolutions. By presenting conflicts and their resolutions, stories reflect our innate desire for stability, providing a sense of closure and contentment.

To bring stories to life, well-defined characters are crucial. Characters act as bridges that help the audience connect and relate to the story. They interact with the story's world, pursuing goals that engage the audience emotionally (Dessart & Standaert, 2023; Escalas J., 2004; Stern, 1994). Moreover, characters add depth and complexity to a story, making it more appealing and relatable to the audience.

In conjunction with the message, conflict, and characters, the plot is a core element of storytelling (Fog, Budtz, & Yakaboylu, 2005) (Figure 1). The plot encompasses the sequence of events in a story, giving structure and guiding the narrative's flow. It determines the order and timing of events, creating tension, anticipation, and dramatic impact. A well-developed plot takes the audience on a journey, introducing obstacles, challenges, and resolutions that make the story immersive, resembling "real-life experiences" (Pera & Viglia, 2016).

Moreover, the authenticity of stories is further influenced by a key storytelling element called verisimilitude, defined as the "likelihood that story events may actually happen" (Dessart & Pitardi, 2019). The degree of authenticity in a story affects consumer engagement, shaping how they connect with the narrative (Van Lear, de Ruyter, Vinsconti, & Wetzels, 2014). Verisimilitude story holds immense significance in establishing trust and captivating listeners. When a story is highly authentic, it can captivate the audience to the point where they become fully immersed in the narrative, experiencing what's known as "narrative transportation" (Green M., 2004) (Van Lear, de Ruyter, Vinsconti, & Wetzels, 2014). Narrative transportation refers to the phenomenon wherein a consumer feels as if they have entered a world created by a narrative. This feeling is triggered by their empathy towards the story's characters and their ability to vividly imagine the unfolding plot (Van Lear, De Ruyter, Vinsconti, & Wetzels, 2014).

Further, empathy towards the characters (Salter & Rouner, 2002), plays an essential part in narrative transportation. As consumers emotionally connect with the characters in the story, they begin to absorb their feelings, thoughts, and experiences. This empathetic bond creates a bridge between the consumer's own emotions and those of the characters, blurring the lines between reality and fiction (Van Lear, de Ruyter, Vinsconti, & Wetzels, 2014). Through this connection, consumers develop a deep sense of emotional investment in the story, driving them to want to explore the narrative's world more deeply.

Additionally, the consumer's ability to vividly imagine the story's plot is crucial in triggering narrative transportation (Green, Brock, & Kaufman, 2004). When consumers can mentally visualize the events, they create a mental landscape that mirrors the narrative's setting, actions, and outcomes. This imaginative process intensifies their immersion, enabling them to mentally traverse the story's twists and turns as if they were actually present within its world.

This experience goes beyond a simple observation; it becomes an active participation where consumers mentally coexist with the story's characters and events. As a result, this narrative transportation (Van Lear, De Ruyter, Visconti, & Wetzels, 2014), captivates consumers and leaves a lasting impact by connecting their emotions, thoughts, and experiences with the narrative's compelling universe.

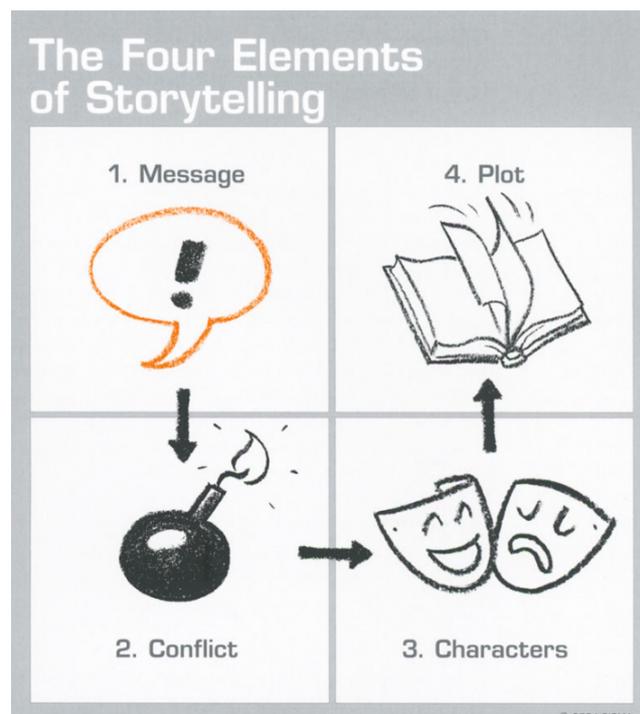


Figure 1 - The four elements of storytelling

The effectiveness of storytelling extends beyond its individual components; it harmonizes with our interpersonal connections and communication patterns. It serves as a powerful tool for organizing and retaining information. Therefore, it allows us to make sense of our own experiences and connect with others (Denning, 2005). As suggested by Escalas (2004), we instinctively compare stories we encounter with our personal experiences, seeking narratives that share similar goals, actions, and outcomes. This

alignment, involving the understanding and experience of others' perspectives, holds growing significance in our interconnected world (Fairbairn, 2002).

Similarly, the process of self-identification and imagination plays an essential role in storytelling. As consumers develop a sense of empathy towards the characters as they understand their emotions and experiences (Lawrence, Shaw, Baker, Baron-Cohen, & David, 2004), allowing them to see themselves as active participants in the brand's journey. This alignment fosters a genuine connection, leading consumers to be more inclined to support the brand, advocate for its initiatives, and engage actively.

Beyond engaging audiences and conveying intricate or abstract messages (Simmons, 2006; Van Lear, De Ruyter, Visconti, & Wetzels, 2014), effective storytelling also reinforces consumer aspirations, ideals, and consumption choices (Cooper, Schembri, & Miller, 2010). By infusing products with personality and meaning, storytelling empowers companies to sculpt and preserve the desired image and identity of their brands (Escalas, 2004; Craig, Hull, Haggart, & Crowder, 2001).

However, while creating a compelling narrative is crucial, it alone cannot guarantee impact. Delivery also plays a vital role in effectively conveying the intended message. Nonverbal aspects of performance, including tone of voice, facial expressions, and gestures, are essential in captivating the audience (Denning, 2006). This combination of effective storytelling with skillful delivery ensures that the narrative's influence is maximized, allowing brands to shape their identity and resonate deeply with their target consumers

Furthermore, effective storytelling allows companies to add depth, emotion, and relatable experiences into their products, transforming them from ordinary commodities into meaningful connections for customers (Dessart & Standaert, 2023). By skillfully employing storytelling, companies can bring their marketing strategies to life, enabling people to emotionally and intellectually grasp them (Simmons, 2006).

The model presented below in figure 2 illustrates the emotional bond between a brand, its story, and the target group (Fog, Budtz, & Yakaboylu, 2005). In other words, the brand creates an emotional connection with consumers by telling a story that resonates with them. Consequently, consumers utilize stories to link the brand's image to their personal experiences, helping them achieve personal goals and fulfill psychological needs (Escalas, 2004).

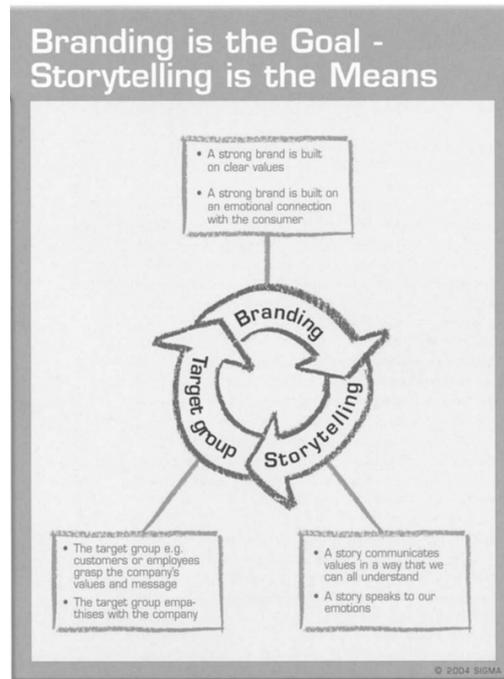


Figure 2 - The branding is the Goal, storytelling is the means

2.2 Brand trust through storytelling

The concept of storytelling, as explored in the previous section, plays a crucial role in establishing trust and meaningful connections (Dessart & Standaert, 2023; Fog, Budtz, & Yakaboylu, 2005), both between individuals and between brands and consumers. In this context brands serve as distinct identifiers that differentiate a particular product from others in the market. This differentiation is an integral aspect of building trust, a concept, defined by Mayer et al. (1995) as the belief that one party can carry out important actions according to expectations, regardless of supervision or control. For consumers to perceive a brand as trustworthy (Li, Zhou, Kashyap, & Yang, 2008), it is based on shared goals and values (Chaudhuri & Holbrook, 2001). Brand trust, according to Chaudhuri and Holbrook (2001), involves consumers' "willingness to rely on the brand's ability to fulfil its stated function".

Therefore, companies employ storytelling as a means to communicate their reputation and build trust with consumers (Hatch & Schultz, 2010), recognizing the power of storytelling as a tool for brand building (Fog, Budtz, & Yakaboylu, 2005). This process involves crafting trustworthy narratives that resonate with audiences on multiple levels and can manifest in various forms, including customer testimonials (Spiller, 2018), real-life case studies, and narratives detailing the company's historical evolution and mission.

Similar to the importance of trust for individuals in leadership roles, trust is equally vital for companies to succeed in the market. Consequently, customers must have a clear understanding of the company's values, its approach to meeting their needs, and the type of company they are dealing with (Denning, 2005). Denning (2005) emphasizes that strong brands are built on a narrative, which represents the promise a company makes to its customers, a promise that must be kept. Ultimately, it is the customers who shape their own story about the company and its products and services, underscoring the importance of commitment to this promise in building brand trust and credibility (Fog, Budtz, & Yakaboylu, 2005).

Therefore, effective communication of the brand promise and the company's ability to deliver on it become essential. Companies can achieve this through the product or service telling its own story or through word-of-mouth recommendations, which often hold greater credibility than electronic advertising in today's context (Denning, 2005).

According to Fog, Budtz, and Yakaboylu (2005), the strength of a brand's trust lies in its ability to establish an emotional bond with consumers. This is achieved through the creation of narrative content that surprises, engages, and entertains the audience (Zhang, Mu, Ma, Ren, & Yan, 2023). Additionally, a brand can have a significant impact when built upon well-defined values deeply ingrained in the company's culture.

2.3 Sustainability communication

Effective storytelling and brand trust, as discussed in the previous section, act as vital links that connect companies with their stakeholders (Dessart & Standaert, 2023). When consumers have trust in a company, they become more inclined to engage with its messages, wholeheartedly believe in its commitment, and actively support its initiatives. This trust is especially crucial in the context of sustainability, as stakeholders seek assurance that companies are genuinely committed to addressing the environmental and social challenges we face. By leveraging effective storytelling and building trust, companies can bridge the gap between their sustainability efforts and consumers' understanding and support, fostering a collective effort towards a sustainable future that meets the needs of both the present and future generations.

In recent years, societal awareness has grown about the far-reaching consequences of human actions on the delicate balance of our environment and communities. This leading growing awareness had led to an increased attention towards sustainability as a critical concern. The United Nations (1987) defined the essence of sustainability as "meeting the needs of the present without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs".

The United Nations perceives sustainability as encompassing more than just environmental protection; it also involves social and economic aspects. The achievement of sustainability involves finding a balance between economic, social well-being, and environmental considerations to ensure long-term endurance and adaptability.

However, the concept of living a fulfilled life goes beyond simple survival. It entails having the opportunity to avoid preventable illnesses, accidents, and other dangers while also having access to fundamental necessities such as nourishing food, quality healthcare, and enriching education. Moreover, living a life of fulfillment entails fostering meaningful relationships with others and building connections with our surroundings. This comprehensive approach sets a higher standard, emphasizing the pursuit of a life that truly befits our human nature (Ott, Muraca, & Baatz, 2011).

With the growing importance and popularity of sustainable consumption, many companies have embraced the practice by communicating their sustainability efforts and promoting their products as "green" and environmentally friendly (Kahle & Gurel-Atay, 2013). People who possess the necessary knowledge and information about sustainable consumption tend to recognize its significance and subsequently modify their behaviors to align with sustainable values (Valor, 2008). However, this increased attention to sustainability has also led to a potential challenge which is the temptation for companies to falsely communicate non-existent or exaggerated sustainability efforts, a phenomenon known as "greenwashing" (Bazillier & Vauday, 2010). Consequently, even companies genuinely committed to sustainability run the risk of being seen as practicing greenwashing, which in turn casts

doubts on the perceived benefits of their sustainable initiatives (Vollero, Palazzo, Siano, & Elving, 2016).

Thus, effectively communicating a company's sustainable efforts can be difficult as it involves promoting transparency of its sustainable practices and by while emphasizing products that meet customer needs and align with sustainability standards (Tölkes, 2018).

Transparency and sustainability, therefore, play a crucial role in the success of any business, as they are essential not only for business success but also for the establishment of a reputable and authentic brand, and it's important to note that such qualities cannot be acquired through financial means (Aula & Heinonen, 2016). Transparent sustainability communication can be used to raise awareness as well as to build trust. By making their sustainable practices visible, brands can give consumers a clear and transparent view of their efforts (Dessart & Standaert, 2023). This proactive approach resonates with informed consumers, who are more likely to engage and support brands that align with their values. In this way, transparent sustainability communication not only educates but also builds a foundation of trust that strengthens the bond between businesses and their customers.

In light of these challenges, the concept of effective sustainable storytelling emerges as a potential solution. Crafting compelling narratives and transparently communicating sustainability messages can serve as a powerful tool for companies (Fog, Budtz, & Yakaboylu, 2005). Beyond the transmission of information, storytelling has the capacity to engage the audience emotionally (Escalas J. , 2004) and establish a sense of authenticity (Dessart & Standaert, 2023). This authenticity, when effectively conveyed, can help companies build and nurture trust among their target group, thereby enhancing the credibility of their sustainability efforts and countering accusations of greenwashing (Zandén & Hansson, 2016).

Furthermore, some companies opt for a collaborative approach, associating themselves with partners who have established reputations for their commitment to sustainability. This strategic alliance lends credibility and enriches the narrative with a deeper layer of authenticity (Dessart & Standaert, 2023).

By prioritizing transparent and emotive communication, and by forging partnerships with reputable sustainability-oriented partners, companies can effectively navigate the challenges of sustainability communication while fostering trust and credibility with their consumers

According to (Dessart & Standaert, 2023) there are four interconnected elements that companies can use to build their sustainability storytelling.

The four elements are also called the 4 A's:

- (Aim) which is the purpose of the story.
- (Actors) refer to continuously engaging stakeholders and associating with partners.
- (Aspiration) the use of aspirational context
- (Action) the use of the right media to bring your story to life

As shown in the figure below the four elements are considered as 4 steps, since they are most productive and effective when outlined.

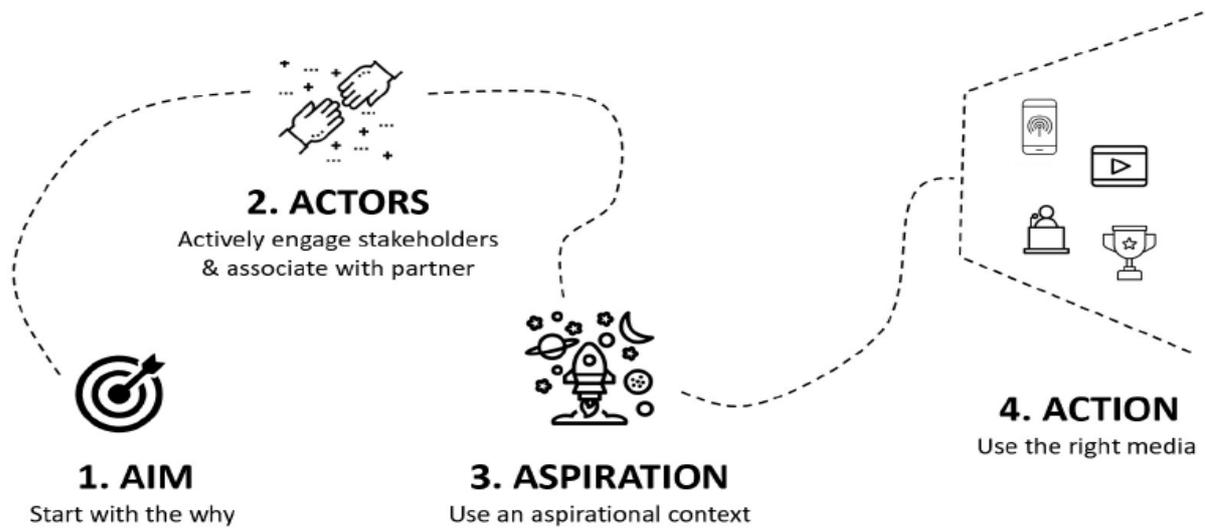


Figure 3 - The Strategic elements for successful sustainability storytelling

The objective of employing storytelling in the context of communicating sustainability varies from one company to another. For those brands that have ingrained sustainability principles since their inception (Dicuonzo et al., 2020), storytelling becomes a means to spotlight and promote their enduring commitment to sustainability. They achieve this by narrating their evolutionary journey and experiences with sustainability over time. Through these narratives, they not only celebrate their sustainable efforts but also showcase their genuine dedication to the cause. By incorporating these concerns into their narratives, these companies use storytelling as a tool not only to promote their sustainability efforts but also to catalyze awareness and discussions about critical societal challenges.

On the other hand, for companies that are actively working to enhance their sustainability values (Huang, Malthouse, Noble, & Wetzels, 2021), storytelling assumes a strategic role in their communication. As emphasized by Dessart and Standaert (2023), these companies leverage sustainability storytelling as a calculated approach to communicate about brand image through their transformative journey. This involves repositioning their brand and business practices to align more closely with sustainability principles (Leroi-Werelds & Matthes, 2022). Therefore, this strategic use of storytelling enables brands to communicate about their transformation effectively and to engage their audience (Denning, 2005) with a compelling narrative of change and progress.

While sustainability might not typically be seen as an entertaining topic (Dessart & Standaert, 2023), brands can add a creative touch to their messaging to make it more engaging (Reinartz & Saffert, 2013). They can rely on the power of their creative messages to effectively spark inspiration among their audience (Böttger, Rudolph, Evanschitzky, & Pfrang, 2017).

In the sphere of storytelling, the context in which a story is set, holds a crucial role in grabbing the audience's attention, resonating with their emotions (Escalas J., 2004), and effectively conveying the intended message (Ji, Shaoming, & Hui, 2019). A well-chosen context provides a relatable and immersive environment that the audience can connect with, thus enabling them to deeply relate to and empathize with the characters (Salter & Rouner, 2002).

To bring these stories to life, storytellers must thoughtfully choose an aspirational context (Dessart & Standaert, 2023). Such a context empowers the audience to experience feelings of positivity, clarity, and self-enhancement since inspiration involves recognizing and appreciating fresh ideas (Böttger, Rudolph, Evanschitzky, & Pfrang, 2017). By incorporating sustainability narratives with an uplifting and relatable context, brands can transform their messaging into aspirational stories that profoundly resonates with their audience.

However, some stories might be perceived as “well-told” stories by having, a beginning, a middle and an end, a main character, a plot and a turning point, and a lot of context (Denning, 2006) but they still need to be delivered through the right media (Dessart & Standaert, 2023).

Therefore, when it comes to storytelling, using video format has the potential to generate a greater visual impact among users compared to text or image storytelling (Zhang, Mu, Ma, Ren, & Yan, 2023). With moving images, audio, and motion, videos have the ability to capture users' attention and engage multiple senses simultaneously. The combination of audiovisual elements creates a more impactful and memorable storytelling experience, eliciting stronger emotional responses from viewers (Morrison & Vogel, 1998). Dobrnic et al. (2020) reported that the informativeness of video ads has an instant and positive effect on the perception of Generation Z users, who constitute the youngest consumer group.

Additionally, one of the most powerful media with high level of immersion is extended reality also called the “new media” (De Regt, Barnes, & Plangger, 2020) . Silva, Ferreira, Castro, Pinto, & Ramos, (2021) state that Virtual reality provides an expansive and immersive environment where individuals can seemingly transport themselves to entirely different environments through computer-generated images and accompanying sounds.

This immersive experience provides the user a 360-degree perspective, amplifying the sense of realism and making the story come alive. Complementing virtual reality is augmented reality, enabling users to interact with virtual elements superimposed upon the real world (Gunnar, 2018). Augmented reality, therefore, complements virtual reality, allowing users to interact with virtual elements superimposed onto the physical world. It involves placing computer-generated graphics, images, games, or even entire scenarios onto the physical surroundings. Notably, these technologies facilitate an encompassing storytelling experience, blurring the lines between the audience and the narrative, all without the need for additional screens or devices.

3 Theoretical framework and hypotheses development

After conducting a review of the literature, the different hypothesis for this study will be discussed below.

Drawing from existing literature, numerous marketers (e.g. Thus, Fog, Budtz, & Yakaboylu, 2005; Denning, 2006; Simmons, 2006; Dessart, 2016), have recognized storytelling as a highly effective strategy for brands to establish enduring impressions, shape their brand image, and forge deep emotional and intellectual connections with consumers. Moreover, storytelling has proven to be instrumental in cultivating trust between brands and their target audience (Hatch & Schultz, 2010) when it comes to communicating about sustainability (Dessart & Standaert, 2023).

However, crafting a compelling story is a challenging endeavor that requires creating content that is distinctive, motivational, captivating, and valuable to consumers, enabling it to resonate with them (Ji, Shaoming, & Hui, 2019).

As an example, Nike used an innovative and inspiring context to express their dedication to conserving resources, minimizing material waste, and decreasing carbon emissions.

When launching their new sneakers called "Space Hippie" made of recycled material and with the lowest footprint. Nike achieved a remarkable success by skillfully drawing parallels between their sustainable product and space exploration, appealing to their customers' inherent desire to explore space (Dessart & Standaert, 2023).

Thus, the carefully crafted context evoked a sense of scarcity, innovation, and the urgent need for sustainable solutions. This context resonated with their customers' aspirations and desires, as it tapped into the fascination with exploring resource-limited environments like Mars.

In the same context, Adidas adeptly uses the concept of sustainable storytelling to captivate and resonate with its audience. Adidas communicates principles of liberation, self-discovery, and empowerment. This method places emphasis on personal determination and the pursuit of authentic experiences. Through the application of sustainable storytelling, Adidas constructs narratives that goes beyond simple product promotion, extending an invitation for individuals to forge deeper connections. Adidas's sustainable storytelling vividly portrays its fundamental values, extending an invitation to consumers to participate in a narrative aligned with their own aspirations and principles. This strategic approach not only establishes a resolute brand identity but also fosters an enduring bond with customers grounded in mutual ideals.

Overall, the use of aspirational context in sustainable storytelling is expected to serve as a vehicle for capturing attention, fostering emotional connection, and building trust.

H1: The use of aspirational context in sustainable storytelling impacts directly and positively brand trust.

When brands incorporate an inspiring context into their sustainable storytelling efforts, they create narratives that evoke emotions, motivations, and aspirations related to environmental, social, or ethical causes. By showcasing inspiring stories and initiatives, brands aim to engage their audience and create a sense of authenticity (Dessart & Standaert, 2023), empowerment, and shared values. Transparency therefore serves as an essential requirement for effective sustainability communication, it functions as a powerful tool for organizations to establish trust with stakeholders, particularly consumers (Zandén & Hansson, 2016).

When consumers perceive a high level of transparency in the brand's communication, it improves interaction and strengthen credibility leading to increased trustworthiness (Matei, Russell, &

Bertino, E., 2015). Thus, the impact of the aspirational context used in sustainable storytelling on brand trust might be further enhanced when transparency is present.

H2: Perceived transparency mediates the relationship between the aspirational context used in sustainable storytelling and brand trust

Sustainable storytelling has emerged as a powerful tool for brands to communicate their commitment to social and environmental responsibility. By creating narratives that inspire and evoke emotions, brands strive to engage and connect with their audience on a deeper level. In his book "How Stories Make Us Human" Gottschall argues that storytelling is a fundamental human activity that has played a crucial role in our evolution as a species. It helps humans to make sense of what goes on around them (Escalas J., 2004) by seeing the world through another person's perspective (Fairbairn, 2002), this empathetic ability goes beyond a simple imagination. It involves a genuine attempt to understand, experience, and feel things as the other person does not only during their moments of joy or sadness but also in their excitement, misery, confusion, and pain (Fairbairn, 2002). When consumers connect with the characters in sustainable storytelling, they tend to identify themselves with the stories and imagine themselves living or engaging in similar experiences (Lawrence, Shaw, Baker, Baron-Cohen, & David, (2004); Lee, (2016). Consumers, therefore, see themselves as active participants in the brand's sustainability journey, and this alignment fosters a genuine connection. This process fosters a sense of trust and credibility, as consumers see themselves in the narrative and develop a stronger connection with the brand.

Therefore, storytelling world gives audience the ability to empathize with the characters and take them as an example to follow (Salter & Rouner, 2002; Dessart & Standaert, 2023), This leads us to recognize that empathy towards the characters, acting as a mediator, can significantly influence the relationship between the aspirational context used in sustainable storytelling and brand trust.

H3: Empathy of the audience towards the characters mediates the relationship between the aspirational context used in sustainable storytelling and brand trust.

Finally, researchers (e.g. Van Lear, De Ruyter, Visconti, & Wetzels, 2014; Dessart & Pitardi, 2019) have explored the concept of verisimilitude in relation with the story realism. Verisimilitude refers to the extent to which the events portrayed in a story seem realistic and believable to the audience.

A higher level of verisimilitude increases the suspended reality and narrative transportation experienced by the story receivers (Van Lear, de Ruyter, Vinsconti, & Wetzels, 2014). This suggests that the likelihood of story events occurring influences the audience's immersion and trust towards the narrative. And thusly, perceived verisimilitude may affect positively the relationship between the use aspirational context in sustainable storytelling and brand trust.

H4: Higher levels of perceived verisimilitude in storytelling positively affect the relationship between the aspirational context of sustainable stories and brand trust

Considering the literature and taking into account all the hypotheses. The graphical model of this study is presented in the figure below. The model suggests the relationship among the research variables:

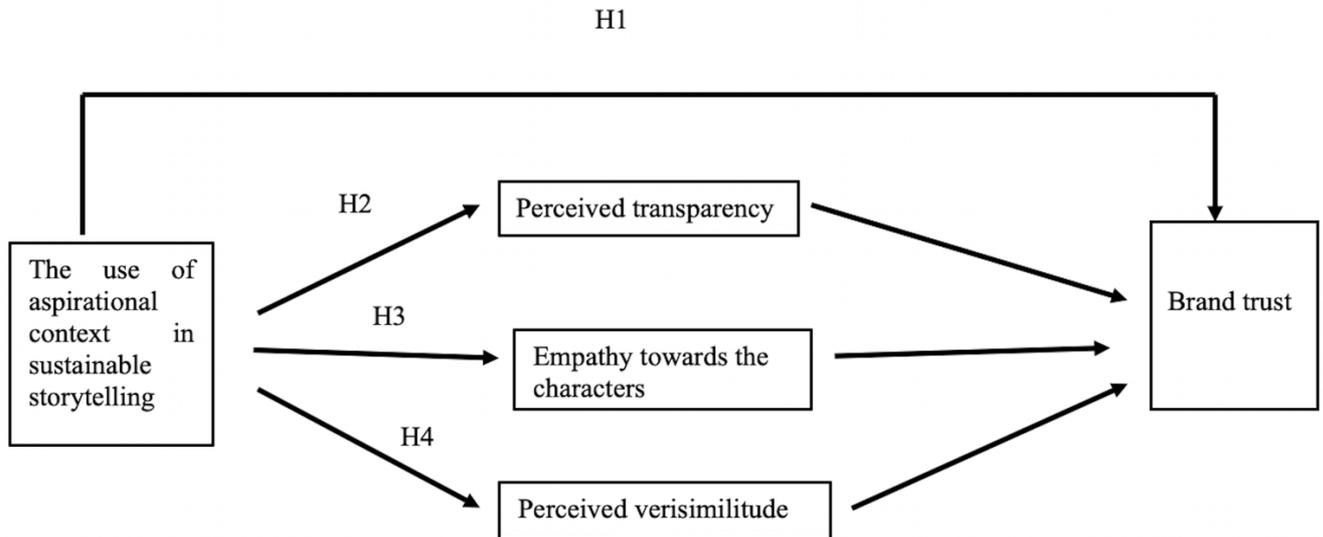


Figure 4 - The graphical model of this research

3.1 Methodology

This chapter presents a clear view of the research methods chosen for this thesis. It starts with a discussion of the research approach suitable for this study and a hypothesis development. Data collection is then explained, followed by the data analysis method.

3.1.1 Context

Based on the purpose of this study, which is to understand how storytelling can be an effective tool for brand to communicate their sustainable efforts in a trustworthy way, a quantitative approach is therefore adopted.

Robson (2002) states that quantitative approach refers to doing pre-specifications, this implies that the research design, sample size, variables, and data collection methods must be clearly specified in advance to ensure validity and reliability of the study results.

To support this study illustrations will be drawn from the well-known brand Adidas, which use storytelling to support their message both inside and outside the company to create a strong and memorable brand.

For several years, Adidas has made storytelling the central focus of its marketing strategy. They have effectively used their own story as well as stories of individuals associated with their brand, including sports stars, celebrities, and everyday athletes, to foster a sense of community among their fans and consumers.

By doing so, they have developed strong relationships that have transformed Adidas into a household name known for its reliable quality.

Storytelling is everywhere these days, and Adidas has used it effectively to position itself as the leading sports brand in the eyes of the public. Whether through celebrity endorsements or genuine, authentic stories, Adidas has consistently maintained a narrative that traces its journey from its inception to the renowned company it is today (Matt, 2020).

To enable a better understanding of my research problem hypothesis will be developed, tested, and confirmed, in order to define the factors that influence the outcome of the study (Johnson & Onwuegbuzie, 2004).

4 Research design

4.1 Data collection

In this section, the research design of the study will be described. First, the data collection process will be detailed, followed by an extensive listing of the different measures and constructs used in the work.

The primary objective of this study is to examine the influence of sustainable storytelling on brand trust. To achieve this, a causal research model was formulated to identify the causal relationship between a specific set of variables (Malhotra, Nunan, & Birks, 2017). An experimental design was then implemented to test the connections between these variables.

In the context of this study, the chosen research model aims to demonstrate the impact of an independent variable “the use of aspirational context in sustainability storytelling” on the dependent variable “brand trust” and the mediating effect of perceived transparency, perceived verisimilitude, and empathy toward the characters between the independent variable “aspirational content used in sustainability storytelling” and the dependent variable “brand trust”.

To evaluate the causal relationships, an experimental design was employed, using a 2x2 between-subject research design. Participants were randomly assigned to one of two experimental conditions: either exposed to a video containing high aspirational sustainable storytelling context or a video with low aspirational sustainable storytelling context.

The internal validity of this design was enhanced by the randomization of the conditions and the inclusion of other causal variables, following the recommendations of Malhotra (2017). Consequently, two conditions were assigned to the participants, based on the sustainable storytelling video context as a control variable. Specifically, participants were subject high aspirational context video and low aspirational context video. Videos were chosen as the media format for the experiment due to their ability to provide a more immersive and interactive experience (Morrison & Vogel, 1998), which is particularly effective for storytelling purposes, as highlighted by Dessart & Pitardi (2019). Additionally, findings from Dobrinic et al.'s study (2020) suggest that videos have an immediate, positive impact on the perception of younger consumers. The selected videos for this study were both shorter than 1 minute in duration, aligning with previous studies that indicate videos between 0-3 minutes are more engaging (Prajakta, Bindu Puthur, Michael, Safak, & Rolf, 2014; Zhang, Mu, Ma, Ren, & Yan, 2023).

Participants in the study were invited to watch a random video from the well-known sports brand Adidas. The choice of Adidas was based on their reputation for telling captivating and interesting stories. In the past, Adidas held the top position as a global leader in sports gear and athletic footwear until the early 1990's. Currently, they rank as the second-largest sportswear provider worldwide, maintaining a significant presence in the market

What sets Adidas apart is their consistent use of storytelling. They have always shared a compelling narratives, starting from their humble beginnings, and tracing their journey to the successful company they are today (Laub, Ferdinand, Kramer, & Pätzman, 2018). This storytelling strategy plays a vital role in shaping their brand identity and establishing a strong connection with their audience. The stories they tell resonate with people and contribute to building a meaningful relationship between the brand and its customers. The content of the experiment can be found in [Appendix 1](#).

4.2 Survey structure

The survey is designed with a clear and comprehensive structure to gather valuable insights on the subject matter. It begins with a concise introduction that outlines the purpose and importance of the survey, encouraging participants to provide honest and thoughtful responses. The questionnaire is divided into sections, each focusing on a specific aspect of the topic, ensuring that all relevant aspects are covered systematically.

The questionnaire primarily employs a structured question format, presenting a set of response alternatives that are both easy and quick to administer, making the survey more engaging for participants (Malhotra, Nunan, & Birks, 2017).

Subsequently, participants were asked two questions to assess their familiarity with sustainable storytelling and the brand Adidas. After this, they were randomly assigned to one of two conditions: (High aspirational context or Low aspirational context).

Afterwards, participants were exposed to one of the two sustainable storytelling videos with identical duration. The post-experiment section assessed the independent variable "The use of aspirational context in sustainable storytelling" and the mediating variables "Perceived transparency," "Emotional Empathy," and "Perceived verisimilitude," along with the dependent variable: "Brand Trust."

Finally, the last section of the questionnaire collected socio-demographic data, including gender, age, and current occupation. For further reference, the questionnaire can be found in [Appendix 2](#).

4.3 Scales and measurements

Independent variable

The study controlled the independent variable, "The use of aspirational context in sustainable storytelling" by randomly assigning participants to either the high aspirational context condition or the low aspirational context condition. The aim was to observe the potential differences in consumer inspiration levels between the two conditions. The evaluation of this independent variable used a 5-point scale based on the work of Böttger, Rudolph, Evanschitzky, & Pfrang, (2017), chosen to maintain brevity and clarity for the respondents.

Furthermore, to assess participants' perception of Adidas as a sustainable brand, the study employed 7-point Likert scales proposed by Maignan (2001), Salmones, Ma, Crespo, and Ignacio Bosque (2005), and Wagner, Tillmann, Lutz, and Weitz (2009).

• *Dependent variable*

The primary aim of this research is to examine how the independent variable "The use of aspirational context in sustainable storytelling" affects the dependent variable "Brand Trust." This investigation also considers the potential mediating variables, namely "Perceived transparency," "Emotional Empathy," and "Perceived verisimilitude." To assess brand trustworthiness, we employed measurement scale proposed by (Erdem & Swait, 2004). This scale includes items that participants rate on a 5-point Likert scale, allowing to assess the participants' perceptions of the brand's trustworthiness based on the presented aspirational context.

- **Control variables**

By looking at the variables that could influence consumer's perceptions, we examined additional factors in our research. Two of these variables were the level of familiarity with the brand Adidas and the level of familiarity with sustainable storytelling.

A study by Hossein, Levent, Anna, Ainur, & Dogan (2021) revealed that when people are more familiar with a brand and its values, they tend to trust it more and have fewer doubts. To measure how familiar participants were with Adidas, we asked them to rate their familiarity on a scale ranging from "not familiar at all" to "extremely familiar."

Additionally, we wanted to understand to the extent of consumers' interaction with video content. To gather this information, we utilized a scale created by Krämer and Böhrs (2017), which we slightly adapted to fit our study's context.

- **Mediating variables**

In addition to investigating the direct impact of the dependent variable "The use of aspirational context in sustainable storytelling" on the independent variable "brand trust", this research considers the role of three mediating variables:

Perceived Transparency: This variable explores how consumers perceive the brand's communication and actions related to sustainability and social responsibility in terms of transparency and openness. Greater perceived transparency is likely to lead to an increase in brand trust since consumers tend to place more trust in brands that are honest (Matei, Russell, & Bertino, 2015). To measure this mediating variable, a 5-point scale based on the work of Kang & Hustvedt (2014) was employed.

Empathy towards the characters: Emotional empathy refers to the extent to which an aspirational context evokes emotional responses in consumers, particularly towards the characters portrayed in the storytelling. Consumers' ability to empathize with the characters can influence their emotional connection to the brand. To assess this variable, a scale developed by Scheidel, Bradlow, & Patti (2006) was utilized.

Verisimilitude: This variable evaluates the perceived realism and authenticity of the aspirational context used in sustainable storytelling. Consumers' perception of how genuine and believable the storytelling is can impact their trust in the brand. To measure this variable, a 7-point Likert scale constructed by Green (2004) and adapted by Elliott, W. R., Rudd, R., & Good, L. (1983) was used

By employing these scales (table 1 below) to evaluate the mediating variables of perceived transparency, empathy towards the characters, and verisimilitude, the study aims to gain a comprehensive understanding of how aspirational context in sustainable storytelling influences brand trust. These measurements will provide valuable insights into the factors that contribute to the effectiveness of storytelling in building consumer trust and loyalty towards brands with sustainability initiatives.

Construct	Scale	Item	Statement
Perceived transparency (Kang & Hustvedt, 2014)	5-point Likert scale ranging from 1 (strongly disagree) to 5 (strongly agree);	TR1	If I wanted to, I could easily find out about how Adidas makes their product.
		TR2	Adidas would be honest and sincere in addressing the issue of sustainability.
		TR3	I believe that Adidas does not have anything to hide.
		TR4	I can rely on Adidas to solve the sustainability problem.
Brand trustworthiness (Erdem & Swait, 2004)	5-point Likert scale ranging from 1 (strongly disagree) to 5 (strongly agree);	T1	Adidas delivers what it promises.
		T2	Adidas's product claims are believable.
		T3	Over time, my experiences with Adidas have led me to expect it to keep its promises, no more and no less.
		T4	Adidas has a name you can trust.
		T5	Adidas does not pretend to be something it isn't.
Empathy toward the characters (Scheidel, Bradlow, & Patti, 2006)	5-point likert scale ranging from 1 (strongly disagree) to 5 (strongly agree)	E1	I could relate to the characters in the advertisement.
		E2	I felt they were right there in the advertisement.
		E3	I was experiencing the same thoughts and feelings as the characters in the advertisement.
Verisimilitude (Green M. , 2004) (Elliott, W. R., Rudd, R., & Good, L. , 1983)	7-point Likert scale ranging from 1 (strongly disagree) to 7 (strongly agree)	V1	The dialogue in the narrative is realistic and believable.
		V2	The setting for the narrative seems real.
		V3	People in this narrative are like people you or I might actually know.
		V4	The way people really live their everyday lives is portrayed very accurately in this narrative.
		V5	Events that actually have happened or could happen are discussed in this narrative.
		V6	This narrative shows that people have both good and bad sides.
		V7	I was easy believing the people in this narrative are real.
Video consumption (Krämer & Böhrs, 2016)	5-point Likert scale ranging from 1 (strongly disagree) to 5 (strongly agree)	Cons1	I often watch videos.
		Cons2	I prefer watching videos to reading texts with image.
		Cons3	I can remember videos better than text content.
		Cons4	If a video is too long, I stop watching
		Cons5	I tend not to watch videos to the end .
Corporate Social Responsibility (Maignan, 2001) (Salmones, Ma, Crespo, & Ignacio Bosque , 2005)	7-point Likert scale Ranging from 1 "Strongly disagree" to 7 "Strongly agree"	CSR1	Adidas is a socially responsible company.
		CSR2	Adidas is concerned to improve the well-being of society.
		CSR3	Adidas follows high ethical standards.

<i>(Wagner, Tillmann, Lutz, & Weitz, 2009)</i>			
The use of aspirational context <i>(Böttger, Rudolph, Evanschitzky, & Pfrang, 2017)</i>	5-point Likert scale ranging from 1 (strongly disagree) to 5 (strongly agree)	AC1	The content provided stimulated my imagination.
		AC2	I appreciate the new idea captured by Adidas.
		AC3	By watching the video, I unexpectedly and spontaneously got new ideas.
		AC4	I admire the new idea shared in the content provided by Adidas.
		AC5	I feel I discovered something new from the commercial.
		AC6	The content by Adidas inspired me to do something.

Table 1 - Scales and measures

4.4 Survey Conduction

The survey was carefully conducted using the Qualtrics software, which allowed for efficient development and easy sharing. The questionnaire was designed with great attention to detail to ensure a user-friendly and engaging experience for respondents, enhancing the quality of data collected. Participants were considerably informed about the approximate time required to complete the questionnaire.

Before the official launch, a pre-test was thoughtfully executed with 5 participants, all of whom possessed knowledge in the marketing field. The pre-test played a critical role in refining the survey's structure, identifying potential issues, and ensuring that the questions were clear, relevant, and unbiased. Their valuable feedback was taken into careful consideration, resulting in significant improvements to the final version of the questionnaire. Once the adjustments were applied, the survey was formally launched, making use of an anonymous Qualtrics-generated link that was shared across multiple social media platforms, including Facebook groups.

To augment participation, a heartfelt personal post explaining the study's purpose was thoughtfully crafted and publicly shared on prominent social media platforms such as Facebook, LinkedIn, and Instagram. This genuine communication effectively captured the interest of potential respondents, fostering a sense of purpose and encouraging active participation. Moreover, to extend the reach beyond social media, an email was thoughtfully sent to colleagues at POST Luxembourg from various age groups. This personalized outreach emphasized the significance of their contribution, encouraging them to participate in the survey.

The survey remained accessible for a generous duration of two weeks. During this period, regular follow-ups were conducted.

4.5 Respondents

In the context of data collection, a total of 179 responses were acquired through an online questionnaire. To maintain an equitable distribution of participants across conditions, 100 responses were thoughtfully selected for analysis after filtering out any incomplete or missing data. Both groups, consisting of high-condition (Aspirational context) and low-condition (non-aspirational context) participants, were carefully designed to have an equal sample size of 50 responses each. This approach facilitated an impartial and objective comparison, thereby enabling the extraction of meaningful insights from the subsequent analysis.

Regarding the demographics of the study sample, it was found that 50.5% of the respondents fell between the age range of 18 and 24 years, highlighting a substantial representation of young adults. Moreover, approximately 48% of the participants identified themselves as employees, indicating a diverse mix of occupational backgrounds. Interestingly, the male population dominated the sample, accounting for 57% of the respondents. It's worth noting that gender representation could be a factor in the subsequent analysis.

To gain further insights into the participants' familiarity with sustainable storytelling, the data revealed that nearly half of the respondents expressed some level of familiarity with the concept. Specifically, 45.5% indicated slight familiarity, while another 45% claimed to be very familiar with the brand, suggesting a significant interest in sustainable storytelling among the study participants.

For a comprehensive overview of the study sample demographics, Table 2 has been provided, offering a detailed breakdown of the age groups, employment status, and gender distribution among the respondents. This information will prove valuable in contextualizing and interpreting the results of the subsequent analysis.

Familiarity with sustainable storytelling	Not familiar at all	9.9%
	Slightly familiar	45.5%
	Neither unfamiliar Nor familiar	17.8%
	Very familiar	25%
	Extremely familiar	1%
Familiarity with the brand Adidas	Not familiar at all	2%
	Slightly familiar	15%
	Neither unfamiliar Nor familiar	10%
	Very familiar	45%
	Extremely familiar	28%
Gender	Female	43%
	Male	57%
	Non-binary / third gender	0%
Occupation	Employed	48%
	Unemployed	4%
	Retired	1%
	Student	47%
Age	Between 18 and 24	50.5%
	Between 25 and 34	26.7%
	Between 35 and 44	12.9%
	Between 45 and 55	7.9%
	Above 55	1%

Table 2 - Overview of Participants' Characteristics

5 Results

This section includes a preliminary analysis to assess the normality, validity, and reliability of the data, ensuring its appropriateness for further examination. By doing so, the study aims to rigorously assess the impact of the experimental conditions.

Finally, hypotheses are put to the test, and a comprehensive evaluation of the relationships between variables is carried out.

5.1 Preliminary checks

Before diving into the main data analysis and hypothesis testing, some initial checks were carried out on the entire dataset. The purpose was to make sure the different scales used to create various constructs were reliable and valid. The primary aim was to assess the normality, reliability, and validity of the diverse scales used to construct different constructs. To initiate this process, the normality of each item contained within the scales was examined using the Shapiro-Wilk normality test. The outcomes of this assessment, which can be found in [Appendix 3](#), revealed a significant deviation of the data from a normal distribution ($p < 0.05$, for all items). Additionally, it is worth noting that the kurtosis and skewness values for each item, as presented in [Appendix 4](#), fell within the acceptable range of -2 to 2. This range is considered adequate for assuming a normal distribution of the variables, as referenced from Goerges & Mallery (2010) and Field (2009).

Next, the reliability of the measurement instruments was assessed through a reliability test, specifically using Cronbach's alpha. This analysis aimed to gauge the dependability of the scales utilized in the study. According to Nunnally (1978), a Cronbach's alpha value of at least 0.7 is considered acceptable, while a value closer to 0.8 is preferable for more robust results. This criterion indicates a significant association between the reliability of the test and the validity of the research findings (Bernardi, 1994).

After conducting the reliability test using Cronbach's alpha, as shown in the table 3 below, it was observed that the removal of certain items resulted in an increase in the Cronbach's alpha values for specific variables. Precisely, the first item "Cons1" of Video Consumption was directly eliminated from the analysis.

However, it's worth noting that despite the potential increase in Cronbach's alpha, we decided to retain two particular items for further analysis. The first item "TR1" within the perceived transparency variable and the seventh item "V7" within perceived verisimilitude were both kept, even though removing them could have increased the Cronbach's alpha for perceived transparency from 0.799 to 0.823 and for perceived verisimilitude from 0.856 to 0.860.

As a consequence, the removal of item "Cons1" notably improved the Cronbach's alpha for the video consumption variable, elevating it from 0.663 to 0.790. These adjustments reflect an enhancement in the internal consistency and reliability of the measurement instruments, making the overall findings more robust and dependable.

Scales	Items	Cronbach's alpha
Video Consumption	Cons2	0.790
	Cons3	
	Cons4	
	Cons5	
The use of aspirational context in sustainable storytelling	AC1	0.824
	AC2	
	AC3	
	AC4	
	AC5	
	AC6	
Perceived transparency	TR1	0.799
	TR2	
	TR3	
	TR4	
Brand Trust	T1	0.860
	T2	
	T3	
	T4	
	T5	
Empathy toward the characters	E1	0.755
	E2	
	E3	
Corporate social responsibility	CSR1	0.796
	CSR2	
	CSR3	
Perceived verisimilitude	V1	0.856
	V2	
	V3	
	V4	
	V5	
	V6	
	V7	

Table 3 - Alpha of Cronbach for the reliability

Confirmatory factor analysis was conducted on each scale to assess the fit of the different constructs. Detailed values of factor loading can be found in [Appendix 5](#) for reference.

Following the analysis, all items were retained due to their factor loading scores surpassing the recommended threshold of 0.6, as established by Bagozzi and Yi (1991).

As part of the preliminary checks, the validity of the retained scales from the factor analysis was examined using a Pearson correlation test ([Appendix 6](#)). Each item was found to have a positive correlation with the total score of the corresponding scale (David, 2014), indicating that the items from each scale are significantly correlated.

The descriptive statistics reveal valuable insights into the grouped variables (table 4). To derive the values for each variable, the relevant items' scores were averaged, providing comprehensive measures for each construct. This aggregation process allowed for a deeper understanding of the audience's perceptions and attitudes towards the content and brand.

"The use of aspirational context" has a mean score of 3.1416 with a standard deviation of 0.86045, indicating a moderate level of aspirational context perception with relatively low variability among the audience. For "Perceived transparency," the mean is 2.9825 with a standard deviation of 0.95628, suggesting a slightly lower perception of transparency in the context, with some variation in responses. "Empathy toward the characters" exhibits a higher mean of 3.6333, coupled with a relatively small standard deviation of 0.80193, indicating a consistent and empathetic response from the audience. On the other hand, "Verisimilitude" has a higher mean of 5.0591, but with a larger standard deviation of 1.0992, suggesting a diverse range of responses regarding the content's realism. Lastly, "Brand trust" shows a moderate mean of 3.288, with a standard deviation of 0.9808, implying a reasonable level of consistency in the audience's trust towards the brand. These statistics provide valuable insights into the audience's perceptions and attitudes towards the content and brand, but further analysis and context would be needed for a comprehensive understanding.

	The use of aspirational context	Perceived transparency	Empathy toward the characters	Verisimilitude	Brand trust
N	100	100	100	100	100
Mean	3.1416	2.9825	3.6333	5.0591	3.288
Median	3.0000	3.0000	3.6666	5.1428	3.500
Std.deviation	0.86045	.95628	.80193	1.0992	0.9808

Table 4 - Descriptive statistics for grouped variables

Additionally, a correlation analysis was conducted to investigate the relationships between variables (Appendix 7). The results revealed moderate positive correlations between video consumption and the use of aspirational context ($r = 0.136$, $p = 0.178$), perceived transparency ($r = 0.209$, $p = 0.037$), brand trust ($r = 0.206$, $p = 0.040$), corporate social responsibility (CSR) ($r = 0.272$, $p = 0.006$), and perceived verisimilitude ($r = 0.275$, $p = 0.006$).

Notably, statistically significant correlations were observed between video consumption and perceived transparency ($r = 0.209$, $p < 0.05$), brand trust ($r = 0.206$, $p < 0.05$), and CSR ($r = 0.272$, $p < 0.01$). Importantly, the use of aspirational context exhibited strong positive correlations with perceived transparency ($r = 0.493$, $p < 0.01$), brand trust ($r = 0.651$, $p < 0.01$), CSR ($r = 0.344$, $p < 0.01$), perceived verisimilitude ($r = 0.386$, $p < 0.01$), and empathy toward characters ($r = 0.299$, $p < 0.01$), all of which were highly significant at the 0.01 level.

These findings suggest that when aspirational content is incorporated, it significantly influences the perceptions of transparency, brand trust, the perceptions of verisimilitude, and even the emotional connection the audience have with characters.

Furthermore, perceived transparency displayed significant positive correlations with brand trust ($r = 0.669$, $p < 0.01$) and CSR ($r = 0.288$, $p = 0.004$). This indicates that higher levels of transparency are linked to greater brand trust and corporate social responsibility perceptions.

5.2 Manipulation checks

A manipulation check was conducted to validate the successful implementation of the intended variations in aspirational context levels across the experimental conditions. This validation process involved a combination of detailed statistical analyses and inferential assessments, collectively measuring the impact of the manipulation on participant reactions.

The aspirational context, especially when combined with creativity and inspiration (high condition), is expected to exercise a more noticeable influence on brand trust compared to situations with limited content inspiration (low condition). To address this question, an independent samples t-test was performed to compare the means of the two groups: high aspirational context and low aspirational context.

Descriptive statistics were carefully calculated to examine the central tendency and distribution of aspirational context scores within each distinct experimental condition. The levels of aspirational context were categorized as either "Low Aspirational Context" or "High Aspirational Context." Mean values, standard deviations, and standard errors of the mean were carefully tabulated for each respective group (Table 5 below).

The use of aspirational context in sustainable storytelling				
	N	Mean	Std. Deviation	Std. Error Mean
Low aspirational context	50	2.5366	.61747	.08732
High aspirational context	50	3.7466	.60631	.08574
Significance	YES	t= -9.887, p < 0.001		

Table 5 - Manipulation controls for the treatment condition

The findings revealed that participants exposed to the "High Aspirational Context" condition reported a significantly higher mean aspirational content score (Mean = 3.75) compared to their counterparts in the "Low Aspirational Context" condition (Mean = 2.54).

To further emphasize the significance of the mean differences across the diverse experimental conditions, an independent samples t-test was executed. Prior to this, Levene's test for the equality of variances was administered to determine if the assumption of equal variances was met.

The outcomes of Levene's test demonstrated that the assumption of equal variances was well-founded ($F = 0.017$, $p = 0.895$), providing the basis to proceed with an independent samples t-test that assumes equal variances. This t-test highlighted a notably significant difference in means between the "Low Aspirational Context" and "High Aspirational Context" groups ($t = -9.887$, $p < 0.001$, two-tailed).

The disparity in mean values between the two groups was established at -1.21 ($SE = 0.122$), accompanied by a 95% confidence interval spanning from -1.45 to -0.97 . These outcomes collectively offer compelling evidence that the manipulation effectively induced distinct levels of aspirational context across the experimental conditions.

The outcome of the manipulation check reinforces the notion that the intended manipulation of aspirational context successfully resulted in noticeable differences in participant reactions between the "Low Aspirational Context" and "High Aspirational Context" scenarios. This finding enhances the credibility of the experimental design and establishes a robust foundation for interpreting subsequent observations in the study.

5.3 Hypotheses testing

H1: *The use of aspirational context in sustainable storytelling impacts directly and positively brand trust.*

Once confirming the accurate manipulation of the treatment, the primary hypothesis of this study (H1) aimed to examine the direct and positive influence of the use of aspirational context in sustainable storytelling under the two distinct content conditions: "High Aspirational Context" and "Low Aspirational Context," on consumer brand trust.

Furthermore, an independent sample t-test was used to establish the ultimate statistical significance of this observed difference. Notably, these findings lend strong support to the affirmation of H1. The results undoubtedly highlighted a substantial divergence in brand trust between the two scenarios. Interestingly, participants exposed to the "High Aspirational Context" demonstrated notably higher levels of brand trust (mean score of 3.968) compared to those subjected to "Low Aspirational Context" (mean score of 2.608).

Additionally, an independent sample t-test was employed to validate the significance of this observed difference. Notably, the findings strongly support the main hypothesis (H1). There is a clear difference in brand trust between the two situations. People exposed to "High Aspirational Context" had higher trust (Mean: 3.968) compared to those exposed to "Low Aspirational Context" (Mean: 2.608).

Moreover, the variations observed between the conditions held notable statistical importance (t-value: -9.618, $p < 0.001$). As a result, we find substantial **support for hypothesis H1**. The outcomes corresponding to the initial hypothesis are succinctly presented in the provided below in Table 6.

	Brand trust	
Low aspirational context	50	2.608
High aspirational context	50	3.968
Significance	YES	t= -9.618, $p < 0.001$

Table 6 - Results for the first hypothesis (H1)

H2: *Perceived transparency mediates the relationship between the aspirational context used in sustainable storytelling and brand trust*

The second hypothesis of the research (H2) aimed to test the connection between the use aspirational context in sustainable storytelling and Brand Trust, while investigating the potential mediating role of Perceived Transparency. Through regression analysis, the study revealed noteworthy insights. The outcomes demonstrated significant direct effects of both the IV the use of aspirational context and Perceived Transparency on Brand Trust. Notably, the use of aspirational context in sustainable storytelling displayed a positive correlation with Brand Trust ($\beta = 0.424, p < 0.001$), and Perceived Transparency exhibited a similar positive relationship ($\beta = 0.460, p < 0.001$). This implies that both, the use of aspirational context in sustainable storytelling and transparency have a favorable impact on consumers' trust in the brand. To further explore the mediating impact of Perceived Transparency a Sobel test was conducted. The computed Sobel test statistic was 0.547, with a standard error of 0.472. The associated p-value for the Sobel test stood at 0.00003674, signifying statistical significance. The results support the notion that Perceived Transparency indeed acts as a mediator between the use of aspirational context in sustainable storytelling and Brand Trust. Therefore, **H2 is accepted**.

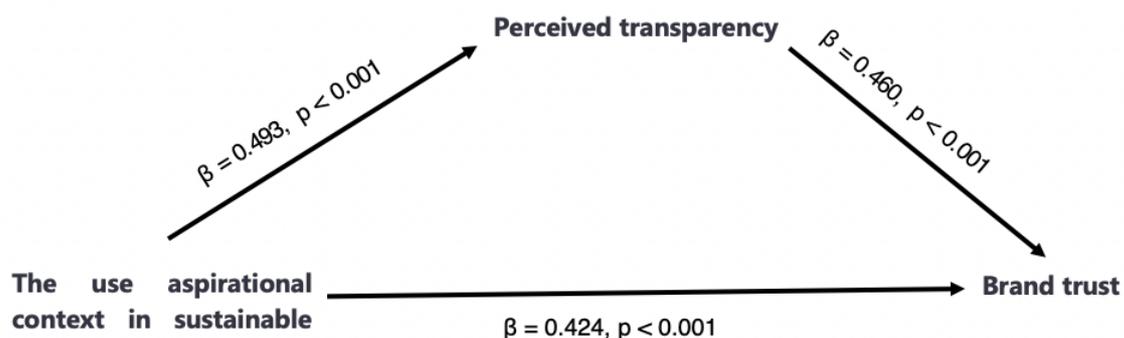


Figure 5 - Mediation effect of perceived transparency between the aspirational context used in sustainable storytelling and brand trust

H3: *Empathy of the audience towards the characters mediates the relationship between the aspirational context used in sustainable storytelling and brand trust.*

H3 aimed to examine the potential relationship between aspirational context used in sustainable storytelling, empathy towards characters, and their combined impact on brand trust. Regression analysis was conducted to reveal direct effects, uncovering a significant positive correlation between the use of aspirational context in sustainable storytelling and empathy towards the characters ($\beta = 0.279, p < 0.001$). Additionally, both the use of aspirational context in sustainable storytelling ($\beta = 0.630, p < 0.001$) and empathy towards the characters ($\beta = 0.401, p < 0.001$) significantly influenced brand trust. The mediation analysis, employing a Sobel test, confirmed empathy towards the characters as a mediator between the use of aspirational context in sustainable storytelling and brand trust, with a Sobel test statistic (z) of 2.54 and a p-value of 0.0109, indicating an indirect effect. Given the significance of the results ($p < 0.05$), the null hypothesis is rejected, thus **supporting** the third hypothesis, **H3**.

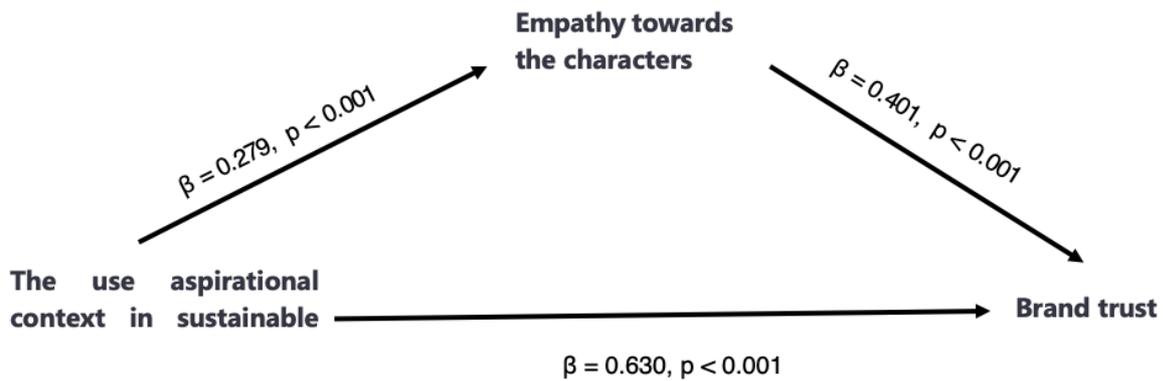


Figure 6- Mediation effect of the empathy towards the characters between the aspirational context used in sustainable storytelling and brand trust

H4: Higher levels of perceived verisimilitude in storytelling positively affect the relationship between the aspirational context of sustainable stories and brand trust

To test this hypothesis, a regression analysis was conducted. The results revealed that the use aspirational context in sustainable storytelling significantly and positively with the perceived verisimilitude, with a standardized coefficient (Beta) of 0.386 and a p-value of <0.001. In contrast, the perceived verisimilitude did not show a significant direct influence on Brand Trust, as evidenced by its standardized coefficient (Beta) of 0.037 and a p-value of 0.659.

To explore the potential mediating role of perceived verisimilitude between the use of aspirational context in sustainable storytelling and brand trust, a Sobel test was performed. This test aimed to assess the potential indirect impact of the mediating variable "Perceived verisimilitude" in the relationship between the DV in the presence of the IV.

The Sobel test outcomes indicated that the interaction effect lacked statistical significance, with a p-value of 0.66170493. Thus, were unable to dismiss the null hypothesis, implying that the interaction effect isn't significant.

Consequently, **H4 is not supported.**

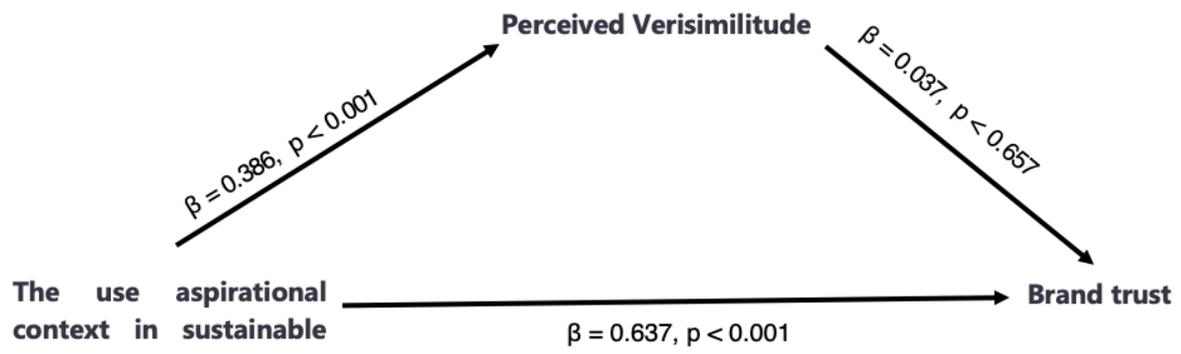


Figure 7-Mediation effect of perceived verisimilitude between the aspirational context used in sustainable storytelling and brand trust

6 Discussion

The review of this study has expanded our existing knowledge regarding the effectiveness of storytelling as a powerful strategy for creating long lasting impressions, shaping brand image, and fostering trust between brands and their target audience (Hatch & Schultz, 2010; Denning, 2006; Simmons, 2006), particularly within the context of sustainability and ethical practices. While the potential benefits of sustainable storytelling are evident, the art of crafting compelling narratives that deeply resonate with consumers poses a complex challenge (Ji et al., 2019). This study thoroughly examines the dynamics of sustainable storytelling, investigating the role of aspirational context and its interplay with transparency, empathy towards characters, and verisimilitude in shaping brand trust.

To examine this hypothesis, the study tested the impact of aspirational context under two conditions: low aspirational context and high aspirational context. It was hypothesized that participants exposed to narratives featuring high aspirational context would demonstrate elevated levels of brand trust compared to those engaging with low aspirational context narratives (H1). The outcomes of the independent sample t-test confirmed this expectation.

Indeed, the findings from the independent t-test strongly backed up this idea. The examination showed a clear difference in how much people trusted the brand Adidas when comparing the "High Aspirational Context" and "Low Aspirational Context" situations. This result emphasizes the powerful effect of adding important aspirational elements into stories about sustainability. Such an approach holds the potential to effectively cultivate a heightened sense of trust among consumers, showing how valuable it is to include inspiring content to shape positive thoughts about a brand.

Hence, the conclusions drawn from the initial hypothesis correlate with preexisting literature, highlighting the central importance of the narrative context in not only captivating the audience's interest but also evoking resonance with their emotions and skillfully conveying the intended message (Ji, Shaoming, & Hui, 2019) while also providing an element of enjoyment and entertainment (Zhang, Mu, Ma, Ren, & Yan, 2023). A thoughtfully selected context establishes a relatable and immersive setting for the story, enabling the audience to empathize (Dessart & Standaert, 2023) and forge a more profound connection with the characters (Denning, 2006).

In terms of the results, the quantitative study produced pertinent findings affirming the fundamental role played by transparency in facilitating effective sustainability communication. This attribute emerges as an essential prerequisite, enabling brands to establish a sense of trust among their consumers, as explained by Zandén and Hansson (2016). Therefore, the second hypothesis (H2) examined how perceived transparency influences the connection between aspirational context and brand trust. The insights from the regression analysis offered interesting revelations, showing important direct impacts of both aspirational context and perceived transparency on brand trust. This suggests that consumers perceive both aspirational storytelling and transparent communication as integral components of trustworthy brand identity.

The Sobel test conducted, supported the idea of perceived transparency acting as a mediator, reinforces the concept that when brands provide transparent information in aspirational narratives, consumers are more likely to perceive them as credible and trustworthy (Matei, Russell, & Bertino, 2015).

The third objective of this research was to examine the potential mediating role of empathy towards characters in sustainable storytelling and its combined impact on brand trust (H3). The results of the

study reinforced the importance of empathetic engagement. Participants displayed an elevated sense of empathy towards characters in scenarios involving aspirational context, and both aspirational context and empathy independently influenced brand trust. The findings indicated a notable significance attributed to empathic characters within narratives (Salter & Rouner, 2002). Individuals displayed elevated affinity with characters when the stories resonated with their aspirational pursuits.

This research outcome aligns with existing literature, emphasizing the role of empathetic connections in establishing a bridge between the emotional inclinations of consumers and those of the characters (Lawrence, Shaw, Baker, Baron-Cohen, & David, 2004). The mediation analysis further confirmed that empathy towards characters acts as an intermediary between aspirational context and brand trust. The findings highlight the significant role of relatable and empathetic characters in sustainable narratives, contributing to the enhancement of brand trust.

Shifting to the final hypothesis (H4), it addressed the role of perceived verisimilitude, or realism, in the connection between aspirational context and brand trust. In contrast to the other hypotheses, the findings suggested that perceived verisimilitude did not have an impact on brand trust. This indicates that while aspirational narratives play a crucial role in fostering brand trust, the level of realism in storytelling may not wield the same degree of influence in this specific context. In the sphere of sustainability, brands might need to prioritize other storytelling elements, such as aspirational context and transparent communication, to effectively enhance brand trust.

In conclusion, this comprehensive study significantly contributes to our understanding of the strategic efficacy of storytelling in shaping brand perceptions and cultivating trust among consumers (Hatch & Schultz, 2010; Denning, 2006; Simmons, 2006). Focused within the domain of sustainability and ethical practices, the research offers enlightening insights into the complex interaction among aspirational context, perceived transparency, empathy towards characters, and perceived verisimilitude in influencing brand trust.

These findings highlight the potential advantages of incorporating aspirational elements into sustainable narratives and employing transparent communication to foster a positive brand image. Furthermore, the role of empathy (Salter & Rouner, 2002) as a mediator emphasizes the importance of crafting relatable characters that deeply resonate with audiences on an emotional level, thereby strengthening brand-consumer relationships (Matei, Russell, & Bertino, E, 2015; Lawrence, Shaw, Baker, Baron-Cohen, & David, 2004).

While the study supports the significance of perceived transparency and empathy towards the characters, it also reveals the nuanced impact of perceived verisimilitude on brand trust within the sustainability context. This suggests that while the realism factor may not yield a significant impact on driving brand trust, other strategic components such as aspirational context and transparent storytelling assume greater importance. In essence, this research underscores the significance of designing sustainable narratives that align with consumer values, with the ultimate goal of fostering enduring brand-consumer connections.

7 Conclusion

7.1 Short summary

While the benefits of sustainable storytelling are evident, the challenge lies in crafting narratives that deeply resonate with consumers (Ji et al., 2019). This study aims to examine sustainable storytelling dynamics, investigating the influence of aspirational context and its interplay with perceived transparency, empathy towards the characters, and perceived verisimilitude in shaping brand trust.

To achieve this understanding, an experimental design based on a between-subjects approach was developed. The study aimed to understand the impact of aspirational context across two conditions: low and high aspirational context. Both conditions contained a short video with the same length and related to the same sports brand Adidas.

For data collection, an online survey was created and distributed. Upon conducting an extensive analysis of the survey data, several notable findings emerged. Specifically, participants exposed to narratives featuring a high aspirational context demonstrated an increase in brand trust compared to those encountering narratives with a low aspirational context. This expectation was strongly supported by the results of an independent t-test, revealing a clear divergence in brand trust between the "High Aspirational Context" and "Low Aspirational Context" scenarios. Indeed, the findings from the independent t-test strongly supported this expectation, revealing a distinct disparity in brand trust between the "High Aspirational Context" and "Low Aspirational Context" scenarios. This underscores the impactful influence of infusing sustainability stories with hopeful elements, fostering trust among consumers. This approach holds the potential to effectively cultivate trust through inspiring content.

Regarding the outcomes, the quantitative study provided valuable insights. The second phase of testing explored the influence of perceived transparency on the relationship between aspirational context and brand trust. Insights from regression analysis disclosed notable direct effects of aspirational context and perceived transparency on brand trust. This suggests that aspirational storytelling and transparent communication are essential components of trustworthy brand identity. The Sobel test confirmed perceived transparency's mediating role, reinforcing the idea that transparent information in aspirational narratives enhances credibility and trust (Matei, Russell, & Bertino, E, 2015).

Furthermore, the study reinforced the significance of empathy, as participants demonstrated meaningful empathy in scenarios involving aspirational context. Both aspirational context and empathy independently influenced brand trust, and the mediation analysis validated empathy's role as an intermediary. This underscores the importance of relatable and empathetic characters in sustainable narratives, contributing to the reinforcement of brand trust (Lawrence, Shaw, Baker, Baron-Cohen, & David, 2004).

The final aspect explored the perceived verisimilitude's role in the aspirational context-brand trust relationship. In contrast to other hypotheses, the findings suggested that perceived verisimilitude did not significantly impact brand trust. This implies that while aspirational narratives are pivotal for building trust, the influence of realism is less pronounced in this context. Prioritizing other elements such as aspirational context and transparent communication may prove more effective in enhancing brand trust within sustainability.

In summary, this study enhances our understanding of storytelling's strategic role in shaping brand perceptions and trust in the sustainability context. By investigating the interaction between aspirational context, transparency, empathy, and verisimilitude, the research highlights the advantages of incorporating aspirational elements into sustainable narratives and utilizing transparent communication to cultivate a positive brand image.

7.2 Managerial implications

The findings of this study offer valuable insights for managers aiming to elevate brand trust and foster meaningful customer connections through strategic sustainable storytelling. Integrating aspirational elements into narratives emerges as a potent strategy for evoking emotional resonance. By infusing stories with inspiration, managers can forge a deep alignment with consumer values, thereby cultivating a strong sense of trust in the brand.

Transparency assumes a pivotal role in trust-building. Managers are advised to prioritize transparent and explicit communication regarding their sustainability initiatives, practices, and principles. Transparent communication not only enhances the brand's authenticity but also reinforces its integrity, establishing a robust foundation for enduring consumer relationships.

Moreover, the study revealed participants' video consumption ratings from 1.75 to 5.00. Notably, many ratings fall between 3.25 and 4.25, indicating moderate to high video consumption. This valuable revelation holds the potential to steer content creation and marketing strategies, serving as a compass for businesses to craft customized videos that effectively resonate with their target audience and optimize resource allocation for effective outreach.

This awareness enables companies to tailor their videos to suit the preferences of their audience. Understanding that a substantial number of individuals watch videos moderately or frequently, businesses can generate content that holds their attention. This entails the creation of videos that possess captivating, motivating, and intriguing qualities, thereby establishing a strong connection with the audience. By adopting this strategic approach, where the content aligns with audience's preferences, videos become relatable and carry increased value for the audience, as established by prior research (Ji, Shaoming, & Hui, 2019).

Furthermore, the incorporation of empathetic characters and relatable scenarios within narratives enriches them with a sense of authenticity. Empathetic characters (Salter & Rouner, 2002) are those that satisfy the criterion of enabling the audience to understand the character's experience by "knowing and feeling the world in the same way" (Escalas & Stren, 2003).

Practical crafting of such characters centers on strategic considerations, managers can create such characters by focusing on depth, relatability, vulnerability, kindness, relationships, moral dilemmas, growth, and shared cultural references. These characters incorporation can lead to narrative transportation, where the audience emotionally engages with the story to the point of detachment from their own world (Van lear, De Ruyter, Visconti, & Wetzels, 2014).

On the other hand, transparency acts as a conduit for establishing a profound and genuine connection with consumers. By leveraging relatability, these narratives foster a feeling of familiarity, thereby enhancing resonance and ultimately leading to higher levels of trust.

While maintaining a sense of realism remains essential, the study highlights the vital influence of aspirational context on brand trust. As an illustration, the video used for the study's experiment as a high condition, represents a compelling aspirational narrative, highlighting the transformative journey of running. It communicates a message of liberation and self-discovery, depicting running as the purest and most all-encompassing sport, demanding only an individual's determination. By celebrating the absence of external distractions and the freedom from traditional measures of success, such as time and distance, the video invites viewers to embrace running as a deeply personal and authentic experience. Just as the video encourages viewers to liberate themselves from societal norms,

managers can create narratives that empower their audience to break free from conventional thinking, fostering a culture of innovation and self-determination.

Through highlighting achievements via storytelling, managers can shape stories infused with a sense of accomplishment and motivation, similar to the video's minimalist yet powerful approach. Through these strategies, managers can cultivate sustainable storytelling contexts that inspire individuals to connect with their inner selves, unearth fresh inspiration.

Striking a delicate balance between authenticity and infusing narratives with hope and inspiration emerges as a strategic necessity. This equilibrium empowers brands to not only establish deeper emotional connections but also to elevate trust levels, resulting in a more enduring and impactful relationship with consumers.

In summary, the insights derived from this study offer actionable guidance for managers aiming to refine their sustainable storytelling strategies. These insights provide a roadmap for cultivating lasting trust and forging enduring connections with consumers. The central objective is to craft narratives that embody authenticity and positivity, culminating in a compelling and resonant story that deeply resonates with and captivates the intended audience.

7.3 Theoretical implications

The theoretical implications of this study hold valuable insights into the dynamics of sustainable storytelling and its impact on brand trust and consumer connections. Building upon the existing literature and the study's outcomes, several noteworthy theoretical contributions emerge.

Primarily, the research highlights the essential role of incorporating aspirational elements into sustainable narratives to elevate brand trust. The study reveals that when brands infuse stories with inspiration, it directly fosters a stronger sense of trust among consumers. This aligns with established research highlighting storytelling's potential to create profound emotional resonance and lasting impressions (Hatch & Schultz, 2010; Denning, 2006; Simmons, 2006).

Furthermore, the study enhances our understanding of the interaction between transparency and sustainable storytelling. The findings suggest that transparent communication about sustainability initiatives enhances the relationship between storytelling and brand trust. This emphasizes the critical role of openness in establishing authenticity and credibility, reinforcing the foundation for enduring consumer relationships (Matei, Russell, & Bertino, 2015).

Additionally, the examination of empathy's role in sustainable storytelling contributes to our understanding of its impact on brand trust. By examining how consumers connect with narrative characters, the study extends our insights into how empathy contributes to the development of trust. This signifies that when consumers empathize with characters, it strengthens their trust in the brand, highlighting the human-centric dimension of effective storytelling (Lawrence, Shaw, Baker, Baron-Cohen, & David, 2004; Lee, 2016).

Moreover, the study's analysis of narrative verisimilitude initiates discussions about the subtle impact of realism on brand trust. While not directly correlated in this context, the research provides opportunities for looking into how different levels of narrative transportation as an outcome of verisimilitude could influence consumer perceptions and engagement (Van Lear, de Ruyter, Visconti, & Wetzels, 2014).

By emphasizing the significance of aspirational content, transparent communication, empathy, and narrative authenticity, the study enriches our grasp of how brands can strategically employ storytelling to cultivate enduring connections with consumers. These insights lay the groundwork for future research endeavors, offering a deeper exploration of storytelling's potential to fortify the bond between brands and their audience.

7.4 Limitations and suggestions for further research

While this study provides valuable insights into the role of aspirational context in fostering trustworthy communication of sustainability through storytelling, several limitations necessitate careful consideration and suggest potential directions for future research.

The method of survey distribution, primarily through online platforms, may introduce biases toward individuals who are less technologically adept or have a weak online presence, potentially skewing the participant pool and influencing the representation of certain demographics, leading to potential sampling biases. To mitigate this limitation, future studies could adopt a more diversified approach incorporating a mix of online and offline methods to ensure a broader representation of demographics and mitigate potential biases associated with online platforms.

Moreover, the demographic composition of the sample, with a significant majority of participants falling within the age range of 18 to 24 years, raises concerns about the generalizability of findings to a broader age spectrum. This focus on younger respondents might limit the applicability of results to older generations, where attitudes and perceptions might differ (Lawry, Popovic, Blackler, & Thompson, 2019). To address this limitation, future research could consider expanding the participant pool to include a more diverse age range, allowing for a more comprehensive examination of how different age groups respond to aspirational storytelling. Additionally, the gender imbalance, with a higher proportion of male participants, could potentially introduce gender-related biases in the subsequent analysis, potentially influencing the observed relationships between aspirational context, transparency, empathy, and verisimilitude.

Exploring the potential interaction effects between different storytelling elements, beyond aspirational context, could uncover synergistic or contradictory relationships that further refine our understanding of effective brand communication strategies. Furthermore, incorporating mixed-methods research, such as combining surveys with in-depth interviews or focus groups, could offer a more holistic view of participants' attitudes, motivations, and emotional responses to aspirational narratives.

While the study focused on the brand Adidas for the experiment, future studies could explore a broader range of brands and industries to determine the universality of the observed relationships. The finding that 45.5% of participants indicated slight familiarity while another 45% claimed to be very familiar with the brand suggests a significant interest in sustainable storytelling among the study participants, highlighting the relevance and importance of the study's focus.

In conclusion, these limitations emphasize the need for a more comprehensive and diverse approach to research in this domain. Addressing these limitations through carefully designed future studies will not only enhance the validity and generalizability of findings but also contribute to a more holistic and nuanced understanding of sustainable storytelling's impact on consumer-brand relationships.

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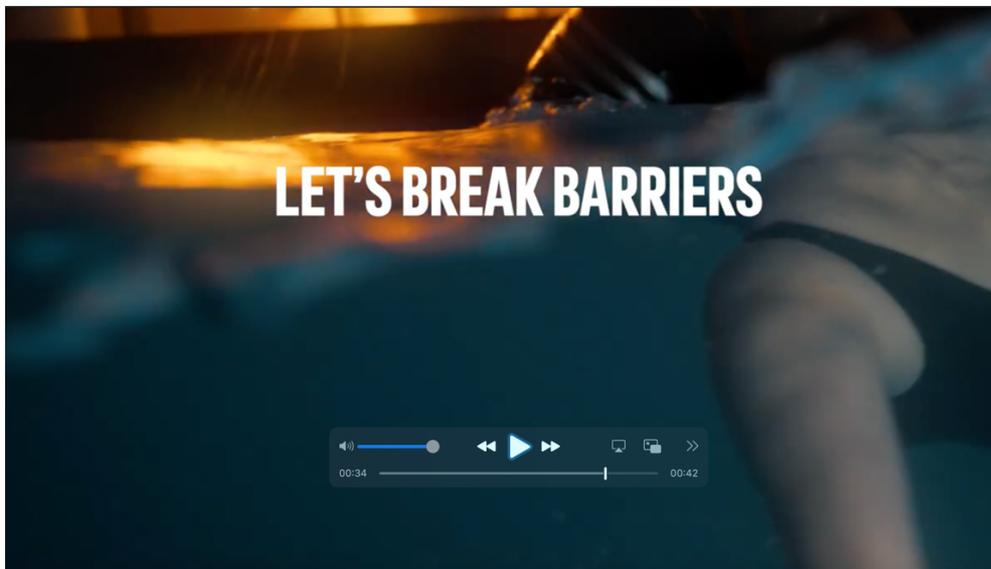
9 Appendices

Appendix 1: Illustration of content presented in the experiment.

Video 1: High condition- Running needs nothing but you by Adidas



Video 2: Low condition – Let's break barriers by Adidas



COMMUNICATING SUSTAINABILITY THROUGH STORYTELLING.

Start of Block: Introduction

Q1 Dear participant,

As part of my master's thesis 🎓, I am conducting a brief questionnaire to gather insights into your perceptions of sustainable storytelling. Your participation in this survey would be immensely valuable in advancing my research.

Every single answer holds importance, so please do not hesitate to share your unique perspectives. All the data collected will be treated with the utmost **confidentiality and** handled with complete **anonymity**.

Together, we can make a significant impact in advancing our understanding of sustainable storytelling. Thank you in advance for your invaluable support! 🙏

Fatimaezzahra

HERRAT

Master student in International Strategic Marketing

End of Block: Introduction

Start of Block: General questions

Q1 How familiar are you with brands sharing their sustainability efforts by telling a story?

- Not familiar at all (1)
 - Slightly familiar (2)
 - Neither unfamiliar Nor familiar (3)
 - Very familiar (4)
 - Extremely familiar (5)
-

Q2 How familiar are you with the brand Adidas?

- Not familiar at all (1)
 - Slightly familiar (2)
 - Neither unfamiliar Nor familiar (3)
 - Very familiar (4)
 - Extremely familiar (5)
-

Q3 Please rate the extent to which you Agree or Disagree with each of the following statements about Video consumption.

	Strongly Disagree (1)	Disagree (2)	Neither agree nor disagree (3)	Agree (4)	Strongly Agree (5)
I often watch videos. (1)	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
I prefer watching videos to reading texts with images. (2)	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
I can remember videos better than text content. (3)	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
If a video is too long, I stop watching. (4)	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
I tend not to watch videos to the end. (5)	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>

End of Block: General questions

Start of Block: Experiment

Q4 You are now going to be exposed to the video "Let's Break Barriers" by Adidas. **Please watch it carefully and remember the title before answering the questions to come.**

Q5 You are now going to be exposed to the video "Running Needs Nothing But You" by Adidas. **Please watch it carefully and remember the title before answering the questions to come.**

End of Block: Experiment

Start of Block: Post-experiment

Q6 Which video content did you experiment with?

- "Let's Break Barriers" by Adidas. (1)
- "Running Needs Nothing But You" by Adidas. (2)

Page Break _____

Q7 On a scale from "Strongly Disagree" to "Strongly Agree". How would you evaluate the content provided in the video?

	Strongly disagree (1)	Disagree (2)	Neither agree nor disagree (3)	Agree (4)	Strongly Agree (5)
The content provided stimulated my imagination. (1)	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
I appreciate the new idea captured by Adidas. (2)	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
By watching the video, I unexpectedly and spontaneously got new ideas. (3)	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
I admire the new idea shared in the content provided by Adidas. (4)	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
I feel I discovered something new from the commercial. (5)	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
The content by Adidas inspired me to do something. (6)	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>

 Page Break

Q8 Please rate the extent to which you Agree or Disagree with each of the following statements about Adidas's transparency?

	Strongly Disagree (1)	Disagree (2)	Neither agree nor disagree (3)	Agree (4)	Strongly Agree (5)
If I wanted to, I could easily find out about how Adidas makes their product. (1)	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Adidas would be honest and sincere in addressing the issue of sustainability. (2)	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
I believe that Adidas does not have anything to hide. (3)	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
I can rely on Adidas to solve the sustainability problem. (4)	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>

Page Break

Q9 To which extent do you agree with the following statements about Adidas on a scale from "Strongly Disagree" to "Strongly Agree"?

	Strongly Disagree (1)	Disagree (2)	Neither agree nor disagree (3)	Agree (4)	Strongly Agree (5)
Adidas delivers what it promises. (1)	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Adidas's product claims are believable. (2)	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Over time, my experiences with Adidas have led me to expect it to keep its promises, no more and no less. (3)	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Adidas has a name you can trust. (4)	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Adidas does not pretend to be something it isn't. (5)	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>

Page Break

Q10 On a scale from "Strongly Disagree" to "Strongly Agree". How would you rate your feelings toward the ad you just saw?

	Strongly Disagree (1)	Disagree (2)	Neither agree nor disagree (3)	Agree (4)	Strongly Agree (5)
I could relate to the characters in the ad. (1)	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
I felt the characters were right there in the ad. (2)	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
I was experiencing the same thoughts and feelings as the characters in the ad. (3)	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>



Q11 On a scale from "Strongly Disagree" to "Strongly Agree". How would you rate the following statements?

	Strongly Disagree (1)	Disagree (2)	Somewhat disagree (3)	Neither agree nor disagree (4)	Somewhat Agree (6)	Agree (5)	Strongly Agree (7)
Adidas is socially responsible company. (1)	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Adidas is concerned to improve the well-being of society. (2)	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Adidas follows high ethical standards. (3)	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>

	Strongly Disagree (1)	Disagree (2)	Somewhat Disagree (3)	Neither agree nor disagree (4)	Somewhat Agree (5)	Agree (6)	Strongly Agree (7)
The dialogue in the narrative is realistic and believable. (1)	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
The setting for the narrative seem real. (2)	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
People in this narrative are like people you or I might actually know. (3)	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
The way people really live their everyday lives is portrayed very accurately in this narrative. (4)	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Events that actually have happened or could happen are discussed in this narrative. (5)	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>

It was easy believing the people in this narrative are real. (6)

This narrative deals with the kind of choices people in real life have to make. (7)

Q12 On a scale from "Strongly Disagree" to "Strongly Agree". How would you evaluate the ad you just saw?

End of Block: Post-experiment

Start of Block: Demographics

Q1 What is your gender?

- Male (1)
 - Female (2)
 - Non-binary / third gender (3)
 - Prefer not to say (4)
-

Q2 What is your country of residence?

- France (1)
- Luxembourg (2)
- Belgium (3)
- Other, please specify (4) _____

Q3 What is your age range?

- Between 18 and 24 (1)
 - Between 25 and 34 (2)
 - Between 35 and 44 (3)
 - Between 45 and 55 (4)
 - Above 55 (5)
-

Q4 What is your current occupation?

- Employed (1)
- Unemployed (2)
- Retired (3)
- Student (4)

End of Block: Demographics

Appendix 3: Shapiro-Wilk statistics for normality of scale items

Scales	Items	Shapiro-Wilk statistic	P-value
Video Consumption	Cons1	.803	<.001
	Cons2	.832	<.001
	Cons3	.852	<.001
	Cons4	.803	<.001
	Cons5	.885	<.001
The use of aspirational content in storytelling	AC1	.860	<.001
	AC2	.875	<.001
	AC3	.911	<.001
	AC4	.875	<.001
	AC5	.905	<.001
	AC6	.906	<.001
Perceived Transparency	TR1	.899	<.001
	TR2	.909	<.001
	TR3	.905	<.001
	TR4	.915	<.001
Brand Trust	T1	.885	<.001
	T2	.875	<.001
	T3	.884	<.001
	T4	.841	<.001
	T5	.888	<.001
Empathy toward the characters	E1	.848	<.001
	E2	.826	<.001
	E3	.899	<.001
CSR	CSR1	.929	<.001
	CSR2	.918	<.001
	CSR3	.913	<.001
Perceived Verisimilitude	V1	.874	<.001
	V2	.866	<.001
	V3	.868	<.001
	V4	.917	<.001
	V5	.897	<.001
	V6	.849	<.001
	V7	.885	<.001

Appendix 4: Skewness and kurtosis values for scale items

Scales	Items	Skewness	Kurtosis
Video Consumption	Cons1	-1.076	.802
	Cons2	-.909	.185
	Cons3	-.667	-.272
	Cons4	-1.053	1.192
	Cons5	-.434	-.751
The use of aspirational content in storytelling	AC1	-.686	-.268
	AC2	-.403	-1.030
	AC3	-.101	-.624
	AC4	-.456	-.872
	AC5	.140	-1.019
	AC6	-.243	-.862
Perceived Transparency	TR1	-.298	-.855
	TR2	-.183	-.901
	TR3	.207	-.988
	TR4	.009	-.834
Brand Trust	T1	-.389	-.794
	T2	-.455	-.890
	T3	-.367	-.996
	T4	-.773	-.508
	T5	-.582	-.127
Empathy toward the characters	E1	-.808	.201
	E2	-.976	1.077
	E3	-.328	-.314
CSR	CSR1	-.456	-.608
	CSR2	-.532	-.602
	CSR3	-.582	-.541
Perceived Verisimilitude	V1	-.866	-.117
	V2	-.885	-.142
	V3	-.812	-.387
	V4	-.440	-.804
	V5	-.704	-.323
	V6	-1.070	.505
	V7	-.765	-.079

Appendix 5: Results of the confirmatory factor analysis

Scales	Items	Factors Loading
Video Consumption	Cons2	.762
	Cons3	.771
	Cons4	.589
	Cons5	.669
The use of aspirational content in storytelling	AC1	.654
	AC2	.767
	AC3	.771
	AC4	.792
	AC5	.766
	AC6	.628
Transparency	TR1	.732
	TR2	.848
	TR3	.895
	TR4	.826
Brand Trust	T1	.731
	T2	.844
	T3	.870
	T4	.825
	T5	.721
Empathy toward the characters	E1	.840
	E2	.817
	E3	.803
CSR	CSR1	.800
	CSR2	.858
	CSR3	.871
Perceived Verisimilitude	V1	.713
	V2	.821
	V3	.827
	V4	.745
	V5	.772
	V6	.718
	V7	.685

Appendix 6: Validity of the Pearson correlation for the selected items

Scales	Items	Pearson correlation	Sig. (2-tailed)
Video Consumption	Cons2	.736**	<.001
	Cons3	.742**	<.001
	Cons4	.580**	<.001
	Cons5	.704**	<.001
The use of aspirational content in storytelling	AC1	.662**	<.001
	AC2	.771**	<.001
	AC3	.756**	<.001
	AC4	.761**	<.001
	AC5	.785**	<.001
	AC6	.644**	<.001
Perceived Transparency	TR1	.590**	<.001
	TR2	.836**	<.001
	TR3	.854**	<.001
	TR4	.789**	<.001
Brand Trust	T1	.730**	<.001
	T2	.844**	<.001
	T3	.868**	<.001
	T4	.828**	<.001
	T5	.720**	<.001
Empathy toward the characters	E1	.840**	<.001
	E2	.808**	<.001
	E3	.811**	<.001
CSR	CSR1	.804**	<.001
	CSR2	.857**	<.001
	CSR3	.867**	<.001
Perceived Verisimilitude	V1	.710**	<.001
	V2	.801**	<.001
	V3	.787**	<.001
	V4	.735**	<.001
	V5	.765**	<.001
	V6	.724**	<.001
	V7	.519**	<.001

Appendix 7: Validity of the Pearson correlation for the selected variables.

	Video Consumption	TheUseofAspirationalContent	Transparency	Brand Trust	CSR	Verisimilitude	Empathy toward the characters	
Video Consumption	Pearson Correlation		.136	.209 [*]	.206 [*]	.272 ^{**}	.275 ^{**}	-.001
	Sig. (2-tailed)	.178	.037	.040	.006	.006	.988	
	N	100	100	100	100	100	100	100
TheUseofAspirationalContent	Pearson Correlation	.136		.493 ^{**}	.651 ^{**}	.344 ^{**}	.386 ^{**}	.299 ^{**}
	Sig. (2-tailed)	.178	<.001	<.001	<.001	<.001	.003	
	N	100	100	100	100	100	100	100
Transparency	Pearson Correlation	.209 [*]	.493 ^{**}		.669 ^{**}	.288 ^{**}	.193	.428 ^{**}
	Sig. (2-tailed)	.037	<.001	<.001	.004	.054	<.001	
	N	100	100	100	100	100	100	100
Brand Trust	Pearson Correlation	.206 [*]	.651 ^{**}	.669 ^{**}		.250 [*]	.283 ^{**}	.494 ^{**}
	Sig. (2-tailed)	.040	<.001	<.001	.012	.004	<.001	
	N	100	100	100	100	100	100	100
CSR	Pearson Correlation	.272 ^{**}	.344 ^{**}	.288 ^{**}	.250 [*]		.510 ^{**}	.212 [*]
	Sig. (2-tailed)	.006	<.001	.004	.012	<.001	.034	
	N	100	100	100	100	100	100	100
Verisimilitude	Pearson Correlation	.275 ^{**}	.386 ^{**}	.193	.283 ^{**}		.510 ^{**}	1.288 ^{**}
	Sig. (2-tailed)	.006	<.001	.054	.004	<.001	.004	
	N	100	100	100	100	100	100	100
Empathy toward the characters	Pearson Correlation	-.001	.299 ^{**}	.428 ^{**}	.494 ^{**}	.212 [*]	.288 ^{**}	1
	Sig. (2-tailed)	.988	.003	<.001	<.001	.034	.004	
	N	100	100	100	100	100	100	100
*. Correlation is significant at the 0.05 level (2-tailed).								
**. Correlation is significant at the 0.01 level (2-tailed).								

Appendix 8: Results of SPSS regression analysis of H2 (Perceived transparency mediates the relationship between the aspirational context used in sustainable storytelling and brand trust)

Model Summary				
Model	R	R Square	Adjusted R Square	Std. Error of the Estimate
1	.764 ^a	.584	.576	.6388
a. Predictors: (Constant), Transparency AspirationalContext				

ANOVA^a					
Model	Sum of Squares	df	Mean Square	F	Sig.
1. Regression	40.568	2	27.824	68.193	<.001 ^b
Residual	39.578	97	.408		
Total	95.226	99			
a. Dependent Variable: Brand Trust					
b. Predictors: (Constant), Transparency, Aspirational context					

Coefficients^a					
Model	Standardized Coefficients		Unstandardized Coefficient	t	Sig.
	B	Std. Error	Beta		
1. (Constant)	.361	.285			
AspirationalContext	.483	.086	.424	5.640	<.001
Transparency	.472	.077	.460	6.122	<.001
a. Dependent Variable: Brand Trust					

Appendix 9: Results of the Sobel test of H2 (Perceived transparency mediates the relationship between the aspirational context used in sustainable storytelling and brand trust)

Input:		Test statistic:	Std. Error:	p-value:
a	0.547	Sobel test: 4.12704848	0.06255899	0.00003674
b	0.472	Aroian test: 4.09734852	0.06301246	0.00004179
s _a	0.098	Goodman test: 4.15740379	0.06210222	0.00003219
s _b	0.077	Reset all	Calculate	

Appendix 10: Results of SPSS regression analysis of H3 (Empathy towards the characters mediates the relationship between the aspirational context used in sustainable storytelling and brand trust.)

Model Summary				
Model	R	R Square	Adjusted R Square	Std. Error of the Estimate
1	.722 ^a	.522	.512	.6851

a. Predictors: (Constant), EmpathyTowardsCharac| AspirationalContext

ANOVA ^a					
Model	Sum of Squares	df	Mean Square	F	Sig.
1. Regression	49.700	2	24.850	52.947	<.001 ^b
Residual	45.526	97	.469		
Total	95.226	99			

a. Dependent Variable: Brand Trust
b. Predictors: (Constant), EmpathyTowardsCharaters,Aspirational context

Coefficients ^a					
Model	Standardized Coefficients		Unstandardized Coefficients	t	Sig.
	B	Std. Error	Beta		
1. (Constant)	-.150	.360		-.418	
AspirationalContext	.630	.553	.553	7.515	<.001
EmpathyTowardsCharacters	.401	.328	.328	4.462	<.001

a. Dependent Variable: Brand Trust

Appendix 11: Results of the Sobel test of H3 (Empathy towards the characters mediates the relationship between the aspirational context used in sustainable storytelling and brand trust.)

Input:		Test statistic:	Std. Error:	p-value:
a	0.279	Sobel test: 2.54467678	0.0439659	0.01093789
b	0.401	Aroian test: 2.50256016	0.04470582	0.01232987
s _a	0.090	Goodman test: 2.58899397	0.04321331	0.00962568
s _b	0.090	Reset all	Calculate	

Appendix 12: Results of SPSS regression analysis H4 (perceived verisimilitude in storytelling positively affect the relationship between the aspirational context of sustainable stories and brand trust)

Model Summary				
Model	R	R Square	Adjusted R Square	Std. Error of the Estimate
1	.652 ^a	.425	.413	.7514

a. Predictors: (Constant), Verisimilitude, AspirationalContent

ANOVA ^a					
Model	Sum of Squares	df	Mean Square	F	Sig.
1. Regression	40.465	2	20.232	35.838	<.001b
Residual	54.761	97	.565		
Total	95.226	99			

a. Dependent Variable: Brand Trust
b. Predictors: (Constant), Verisimilitude, AspirationalContent

Coefficients ^a					
Model	Standardized Coefficients		Unstandardized Coefficients	t	Sig.
	B	Std. Error	Beta		
1. (Constant)	.840	.389			
AspirationalContext	.726	.095	.637	7.628	<.001
Verisimilitude	.033	.075	.037	.442	.659

a. Dependent Variable: Brand Trust

Appendix 13: Results of the Sobel test of H4 (perceived verisimilitude in storytelling positively affect the relationship between the aspirational context of sustainable stories and brand trust)

Input:		Test statistic:	Std. Error:	p-value:
a	0.491	Sobel test: 0.43756047	0.03703031	0.66170493
b	0.033	Aroian test: 0.42557527	0.03807317	0.67041736
s _a	0.118	Goodman test: 0.45061887	0.03595722	0.65226426
s _b	0.075	Reset all	Calculate	

10 Executive summary

In an environment of perpetual change within brand communication, the power of storytelling remains a captivating and influential tool. With the growing importance of environmental and ethical concerns, storytelling has gained new dimensions, especially in the realm of sustainability. While sustainable storytelling holds promise for conveying messages of sustainability and building brand trust, crafting narratives that deeply resonate with consumers remains a challenge.

As brands seek to align with sustainability values and connect with their audience, navigating this complexity becomes essential. Therefore, this research aims to analyze how well-established these brands adeptly employ sustainable storytelling to craft narratives that resonate with consumers, evoke emotions, foster engagement, incite action, and establish a foundation of trust.

Building on existing literature, this study aims to understand how integrating elements like aspirational context, transparency, empathy, and perceived verisimilitude into sustainable narratives impact brand trust. The research also strives to comprehend the specific contexts where sustainable stories are most effective in establishing and enhancing brand trust.

Through an experimental design, the type of stimulus significantly and positively influenced participants' brand trust. The strategic value of sustainable storytelling is evident, highlighting the contributions of aspirational context, transparency, and empathetic characters to brand trust in sustainability and ethical practices.

The research findings reveal the compelling power of aspirational context, perceived transparency, and empathetic characters in enhancing brand trust within sustainability and ethical practices. Participants exposed to narratives rich in aspirational context demonstrated heightened brand trust, underlining the importance of inspirational content in shaping positive brand perceptions.

Therefore, transparent communication emerges as a crucial factor in establishing trust, while empathetic characters forge a deeper connection with consumers, acting as mediators between aspirational context and brand trust. However, perceived verisimilitude, or realism, surprisingly holds limited influence on brand trust in the sustainability storytelling context. Which sets the stage for further investigation and research.

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