

The Impact of Digital Storytelling on Consumer Awareness of Sustainability

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Abstract: *In the contemporary digital era, communication strategies have evolved from traditional advertising methods to more engaging narrative-driven approaches. Digital storytelling has emerged as a powerful tool that enables organizations to communicate complex ideas through interactive and emotionally engaging narratives. Sustainability, which encompasses environmental, social, and economic responsibility, requires effective communication to enhance consumer awareness and promote responsible consumption behaviour. This study explores the impact of digital storytelling on consumer awareness of sustainability by examining how narrative elements, emotional engagement, and authenticity influence consumer perceptions and attitudes. The research adopts a mixed-method approach combining survey data and qualitative insights to analyze consumer responses to sustainability narratives shared through digital platforms. The answers indicate that digital storytelling significantly enhances consumer awareness by improving knowledge retention, emotional connection, and trust in sustainability messages. The study concludes that storytelling-based communication strategies can play an important role in promoting sustainable consumption behaviour and strengthening brand credibility in sustainability initiatives.*

Keywords: In the contemporary digital era, communication strategies have evolved from traditional advertising methods to more engaging narrative-driven approaches.

I. INTRODUCTION

Conversations about sustainability have become difficult to avoid. Climate change, plastic pollution, disappearing forests—these topics appear regularly in news reports, documentaries, and increasingly on social media feeds. Governments, environmental groups, and even large corporations try to communicate these concerns to the public. Still, explaining sustainability is not always easy. The topic can feel abstract, distant, or simply overwhelming. Communication strategies have slowly shifted. Instead of presenting sustainability as a collection of statistics or warnings, many campaigns now rely on storytelling. A short video about a coastal village losing land to rising sea levels, for instance, often stays in a viewer's mind longer than a list of climate data. Digital platforms have made this approach more common. Platforms like Instagram, YouTube, and TikTok allow organizations and individuals to share stories using images, video clips, voiceovers, and interactive features. Sometimes the stories are polished marketing campaigns. Other times they are personal accounts—someone showing how they reduced plastic waste in their daily routine, or a small business explaining why it switched to eco-friendly packaging.

Because people spend so much time online, these stories reach audiences quickly. They also travel widely. A short environmental video posted by one creator can easily appear in thousands of timelines within hours.

Consumers today often rely on digital platforms to learn about products and social issues. Reviews, influencer content, and brand storytelling all influence how people think about consumption. In many cases, the line between marketing and education becomes blurred. A brand may promote its sustainable practices through storytelling while also encouraging consumers to buy its products.

This study focuses on that intersection. It explores how digital storytelling might shape consumer awareness of sustainability and whether narrative-based communication affects how people think about sustainable consumption.



II. LITERATURE REVIEW

2.1 Digital Storytelling

Discussions about sustainability communication often point out that environmental issues are widely discussed today, yet they are not always easy for people to understand. Topics such as climate change or resource depletion are complex and sometimes feel distant from everyday life. Because of this, scholars have increasingly looked at storytelling as a way of making these issues more relatable.

Bryan Alexander, in *The New Digital Storytelling: Creating Narratives with New Media*, explains how storytelling has shifted into digital spaces where images, videos, and sound combine to form short narratives. These digital stories tend to travel quickly through online platforms and can reach audiences who might not read lengthy reports or research papers. In a similar way, Joe Lambert's *Digital Storytelling: Capturing Lives, Creating Community* highlights how personal stories create emotional connections. When environmental problems are presented through real experiences—such as a farmer dealing with unpredictable rainfall—the message often feels more immediate.

Research on environmental communication also shows that the way information is presented matters. In *Communicating Climate Change*, Anne K. Armstrong, Marianne E. Krasny, and Jonathon P. Schuldt note that people respond more strongly to concrete examples than to abstract explanations. A story about communities affected by flooding or pollution may leave a deeper impression than scientific data alone.

Storytelling has also entered the field of marketing. Philip Kotler, in *Marketing 3.0: From Products to Customers to the Human Spirit*, discusses how companies now frame their sustainability efforts through narratives rather than technical descriptions. A brand may share stories about recycled materials or ethical production in order to build trust with consumers. However, researchers also warn that such narratives can sometimes create selective impressions, particularly when companies highlight environmentally friendly actions while ignoring larger environmental impacts.

Overall, existing literature suggests that digital storytelling can increase awareness of sustainability issues by presenting them in a more engaging and relatable form. At the same time, scholars often point out that increased awareness does not always lead to changes in consumer behaviour. This gap between understanding and action remains an important area for further study.

2.2 Sustainability Communication

When people talk about sustainability communication, they are usually referring to the ways organisations explain their environmental or social responsibilities to the public. The idea sounds quite formal, but in practice it often shows up in simple examples. A company might announce that it has reduced its carbon emissions. Another might promote the use of renewable energy in its production process. Sometimes the message focuses on labour conditions—fair wages, safer workplaces, or ethical sourcing of materials.

Public institutions talk about similar issues, though from a slightly different angle. Governments and non-profit organisations often encourage individuals to change small everyday habits. Waste reduction, saving electricity, carrying reusable bags, or choosing products that claim to be environmentally responsible. These suggestions appear in campaigns, public advertisements, and sometimes school programs.

The way these messages travel has shifted quite a bit over the last decade. Earlier, sustainability communication often appeared in long reports, official statements, or press conferences that most people never really paid attention to. Digital media changed that rhythm. Now the message is more likely to appear in a thirty-second video, a series of Instagram posts, or a short animated explainer shared online.

Because of this format, sustainability information sometimes feels more immediate. A short video showing piles of plastic waste on a beach can reach thousands of viewers quickly. People watch it while scrolling through their phones, maybe during a commute or late at night before sleeping. The exposure becomes repeated and casual rather than deliberate.

Some researchers argue that this kind of constant exposure increases awareness. It also seems to create a certain emotional response. When viewers repeatedly encounter images of polluted oceans, forest fires, or melting glaciers, the



issue begins to feel less distant. Still, knowing about a problem and changing behaviour are two different things. A person might watch a powerful video about plastic pollution and still buy bottled water the next day because it is convenient. This mismatch between awareness and action appears quite often in studies related to sustainability communication. The information reaches people. What they do with it is another matter.

2.3 Digital Storytelling and Consumer Awareness

Stories seem to affect the way people process sustainability messages. When environmental issues are explained through personal experiences rather than abstract explanations, audiences often react more strongly. The story gives the issue a face, or at least a situation that feels real.

Take the example of clothing waste. Reading about textile pollution in a research report can feel distant. The numbers are large and difficult to picture. A short documentary showing discarded clothes travelling from a shopping mall to a landfill tells the same story differently. Watching trucks unload piles of garments, or seeing workers sorting through them, makes the consequences of fast fashion easier to imagine.

Businesses have noticed this. Many brands now present their sustainability efforts through narrative-style content. A video might show how recycled plastic bottles are turned into fabric. Another might introduce workers in a factory that claims to follow fair-trade standards. The story format often makes the message feel more personal, even if the underlying purpose is still marketing. When these stories feel authentic, they can influence how consumers perceive the brand. Some viewers interpret the narrative as a sign that the company is trying to operate responsibly. Trust develops slowly, but storytelling sometimes plays a role in that process. At the same time, the approach is not without criticism. Certain campaigns have been accused of presenting a carefully controlled version of reality. A company may highlight a small environmentally friendly initiative while ignoring larger environmental impacts within its operations. This practice is often described as greenwashing. Because of this, digital storytelling sits in an uncomfortable middle space. It has the ability to raise awareness about sustainability issues, sometimes quite effectively. Yet it can also construct narratives that simplify or even obscure the more complicated parts of those issues.

2.4 Theoretical Framework

To make sense of how storytelling might influence people's views about sustainability, this study draws on two ideas from communication and behavioural research. These theories do not explain everything, but they offer a useful starting point for thinking about why stories sometimes affect audiences more than straightforward information.

Narrative Transportation Theory

One concept that often appears in discussions of storytelling is Narrative Transportation Theory. The idea behind it is fairly simple. When people become deeply involved in a story, they momentarily step into the world being described. It does not happen in a literal sense, of course, but the experience can feel surprisingly immersive.

Think about watching a short video about a fisherman whose daily catch has declined because of polluted coastal waters. While the story is unfolding, the viewer is not simply processing facts. There is usually a moment of emotional engagement. The fisherman's frustration, the empty nets, the changing shoreline. Those details make the situation easier to imagine.

During that period of involvement, attitudes can shift slightly. Not always dramatically, and not for everyone, but enough to matter. When viewers begin to identify with the people in a story—or at least understand their situation—the message stops feeling abstract. It becomes personal in a small way.

Theory of Planned Behavior

Another framework that helps explain audience reactions is the Theory of Planned Behavior. This theory looks at how attitudes, social expectations, and a person's sense of control shape their decisions. In everyday terms, people are more likely to act on something if they believe it is important, if the people around them seem to support it, and if they feel capable of doing it themselves.



Applied to digital storytelling, the idea becomes quite interesting. A sustainability story might influence how someone feels about a particular issue—plastic waste, for example. If that story also creates a sense that responsible behaviour is socially valued, it could shape the viewer’s intentions.

Still, intention does not guarantee action. Someone might genuinely agree with sustainable practices and still choose convenience over responsibility when shopping or consuming products. The theory acknowledges this gap between what people intend to do and what they actually end up doing.

III. RESEARCH OBJECTIVES

With these ideas in mind, the study focuses on a few questions that seem worth exploring:

- To understand how digital storytelling may contribute to consumer awareness of sustainability issues.
- To examine how narrative elements—visual imagery, emotional tone, and personal experiences—affect the way audiences engage with these messages.
- To see whether repeated exposure to sustainability stories online leads to greater awareness about sustainable consumption.
- To explore whether such narratives influence attitudes toward products that are presented as sustainable.

Aim of the Study

This study attempts to look more closely at how digital storytelling might influence the way people think about sustainability, especially in relation to everyday consumption. Sustainability messages appear frequently online now—sometimes through brand campaigns, sometimes through short videos or personal stories shared on social media. The aim here is not simply to confirm that these messages exist, but to understand whether they actually shape people’s awareness in any meaningful way.

In other words, the study tries to explore whether stories circulating on digital platforms—stories about recycling, ethical production, or environmental damage—leave any noticeable impression on consumers, or whether they pass by like most other online content that people scroll through and forget.

Objectives of the Study

1. To examine how often consumers come across sustainability-related stories on digital platforms such as Instagram, YouTube, and similar spaces where visual content travels quickly.
2. To observe whether these stories—particularly those built around personal experiences, short videos, or narrative campaigns—affect how people understand environmental and social sustainability issues.
3. To look at the way storytelling elements, such as visuals, emotional tone, or relatable situations, influence how audiences respond to sustainability messages.
4. To explore whether regular exposure to sustainability narratives online is connected to a higher level of awareness about responsible consumption.
5. To consider whether these stories have any visible influence on people’s attitudes toward products that are described as sustainable or environmentally friendly.

Hypotheses of the Study

Because the research deals with audience responses, a few assumptions needed to be tested. They are not treated as absolute claims—only as possibilities worth examining through the collected data.

H1: Consumers who encounter digital sustainability stories more frequently tend to show higher awareness of environmental and social sustainability issues.

H2: Story-based digital content generates stronger emotional engagement compared to straightforward informational messages about sustainability.



H3: Exposure to digital storytelling about sustainability is related to more positive attitudes toward sustainable products or responsible consumption.

H4: Even when awareness increases through digital storytelling, this awareness does not always lead to consistent changes in consumer behaviour.

These hypotheses attempt to capture something that appears repeatedly in discussions about sustainability communication: people often understand the issue, sometimes even feel strongly about it, yet their everyday choices do not always reflect that awareness.

IV. RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

4.1 Research Design

The research uses a mixed-method approach. Survey data provided one part of the picture, offering numerical insights into how audiences respond to sustainability stories online. Alongside this, a more qualitative look at digital campaigns helped capture how these narratives are actually constructed and presented.

Using both approaches felt necessary. Numbers can show patterns, but they rarely explain the full context behind them. Observing real storytelling campaigns helped balance that limitation and gave the study a broader perspective.

4.2 Data Collection

Primary Data

For the primary part of the study, a questionnaire was shared with people who regularly use digital platforms such as Instagram, YouTube, and Facebook. These spaces seemed relevant because sustainability stories often appear there—sometimes as short videos, sometimes as posts or campaign messages that circulate widely for a few days.

The survey included **200 respondents** in total. Participants were selected through convenience sampling, mainly because it was practical and easier to reach people within the available time. Most of them were between **18 and 35 years old**, which also reflects the age group that tends to spend more time on digital platforms.

The questionnaire focused on a few simple areas. Participants were asked how often they come across sustainability-related stories online. They were also asked about their general understanding of environmental issues and how they personally feel about ideas such as sustainable consumption or responsible purchasing.

To record responses, a **five-point Likert scale** was used. This allowed participants to express varying degrees of agreement or disagreement rather than simply choosing yes or no.

Secondary Data

Alongside the survey, secondary material was also reviewed. This included journal articles discussing digital communication and sustainability, reports related to digital marketing practices, and a number of case studies focusing on storytelling campaigns connected to environmental or social responsibility.

These sources helped place the survey findings within a broader academic and industry context.

4.3 Data Analysis

After the responses were collected, the data were examined using a few basic analytical methods.

Descriptive statistics were used first. This helped identify general patterns in the survey responses—for example, how often participants encounter sustainability content or how strongly they feel about environmental issues.

Correlation analysis was then applied to explore possible relationships between two variables, particularly exposure to digital storytelling and levels of sustainability awareness.

A content analysis was also carried out on selected digital campaigns. This step involved observing how storytelling elements—such as visuals, narrative structure, or emotional framing—were used within sustainability-related media.

V. FINDINGS AND ANALYSIS

A few noticeable patterns appeared once the responses were examined.



Increased Awareness

Participants who reported seeing sustainability stories frequently online generally showed higher awareness of environmental and social issues. Some respondents could recall specific content quite clearly. For instance, a few mentioned short videos explaining plastic pollution in oceans or posts showing the impact of climate change on coastal communities.

Emotional Engagement

Story-based content seemed to trigger stronger emotional reactions compared to straightforward advertisements or informational messages. Some participants said they felt disturbed or concerned after watching certain videos. Others described feeling motivated, at least briefly, to think more seriously about environmental problems.

Cognitive and Emotional Influence

The responses suggested that digital storytelling influences both knowledge and feelings. Viewers often learn new information from these stories, but they also experience an emotional response. That combination appears to make the message more memorable.

The Awareness–Behaviour Gap

One point kept appearing during the responses. Even when participants acknowledged that sustainability issues were important, their everyday behaviour did not always reflect that awareness. Some admitted that they still choose products based on price or convenience rather than environmental impact. Others mentioned that sustainable alternatives are not always easily available.

VI. CONCLUSION

Over time, digital storytelling has become part of how sustainability issues are communicated online. Short videos, visual narratives, and personal accounts circulate widely through social media platforms, reaching audiences that might not normally engage with formal environmental reports.

The findings from this study suggest that these stories do contribute to greater awareness and emotional understanding of sustainability issues. Participants often remembered narrative-based messages more clearly than purely informational ones.

Still, a noticeable gap remains between awareness and behaviour. People may agree with sustainability principles, yet their everyday choices do not always reflect those beliefs.

Future research might examine whether newer technologies—such as immersive media or virtual reality storytelling—can deepen engagement with sustainability topics.

VII. IMPLICATIONS

Academic Implications

The study adds to existing discussions on digital communication, sustainability awareness, and consumer behaviour, particularly in the context of narrative-based media.

Practical Implications

Organizations attempting to communicate sustainability initiatives may find storytelling formats useful, especially when addressing younger audiences who consume most information through digital platforms.

Policy Implications

Public awareness campaigns that use narrative-based communication could make sustainability topics easier for broader audiences to understand and relate to.

IX. LIMITATIONS

A few limitations should be acknowledged.

The research mainly involved younger digital media users. Responses from older age groups might differ.

The sample size was relatively small, which limits the extent to which the findings can be generalized.



Survey responses were also self-reported. Some participants may have responded in ways they believed were socially desirable rather than describing their actual behaviour.

X. FUTURE RESEARCH DIRECTIONS

Several directions could be explored in future studies.

Researchers might compare how audiences in different cultural contexts respond to sustainability storytelling. Another area worth examining is the role of social media influencers in shaping sustainability narratives.

It may also be interesting to observe how emerging storytelling formats—such as virtual reality or augmented reality—affect audience engagement with environmental issues.

