

Article

Thinking Out Loud? Internal vs. External Communication of Sustainability in Companies

Julia Offermann *, Anna Rohowsky and Martina Ziefle 

Chair of Communication Science, RWTH Aachen University, 52074 Aachen, Germany;
ziefle@comm.rwth-aachen.de (M.Z.)

* Correspondence: offermann@comm.rwth-aachen.de

Abstract: Climate change is already having a significant impact, and Germany, the EU's largest emitter of carbon dioxide, is experiencing this firsthand, prompting adaptation measures in cities. German companies must balance social and environmental responsibility with economic goals. Achieving sustainable business goals requires employee support and engagement, which can be facilitated through internal and external communication using storytelling and narratives. This paper addresses a gap in research on internal and external sustainability communication by examining both simultaneously. Using a semi-structured interview study, the paper examines the current state of sustainability communication in selected German companies, focusing on addressees, channels, structure, and content. The results revealed a high relevance of sustainability in companies, identified similarities between internal and external characteristics of communication, but also highlighted specific differences (e.g., with regard to communication strategies). This paper also identifies effects of communication and areas for improvement and suggests directions for future research to improve sustainability communication and its role in promoting a more sustainable society.

Keywords: sustainability; communication; companies; internal; external; information



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1. Introduction

Climate change is not only a future challenge but already has severe effects on earth and people today, particularly in countries least responsible for it [1]. As an example, Germany has the highest carbon dioxide emissions in the EU, with the majority originating from industry [2]. Driven by the noticeable consequences, preparations are being made for further impacts in terms of climate adaptation procedures and measures in cities [3].

German companies bear a high social and ecological responsibility within society and have economic goals that need to be approached sustainably. For some companies, sustainability has become a voluntary commitment, while other companies are compelled to focus on sustainability by regulations, such as the Corporate Sustainability Reporting Directive [4]. However, it requires not only committed or obligated management for a company to become more sustainable, but the corporate goals must also be supported by the employees to be successfully realized long-term. Additionally, they can simultaneously become part of the external communication of the company, as societal interest in sustainability has continued to rise in recent years [5]. Disseminating such information and values internally and externally can be realized by storytelling and narratives. Storytelling in companies was already investigated in the 80s and 90s, but its connection to sustainability occurred much later. Current gaps in the research field are apparent, both with regard to internal and external communication of sustainability, even though the positive effects of stories are repeatedly emphasized, e.g., [6]. Within research and preceding studies on storytelling, internal and external ways of communicating sustainability are rarely considered simultaneously and comparatively [7].

Therefore, the present paper focuses on contributing to closing this research gap by investigating ways of internal and external sustainability communication in companies.

Applying a semi-structured interview study, the initial situation in selected German companies is investigated, in addition to addresses, channels, structure, and content of communication. Further, effects and requests for improvement in sustainability communication are identified.

The paper is structured as follows: first, the theoretical background regarding companies and sustainability as well as internal and external ways of communication is presented. Based on that, the underlying research aim and question are described, followed by the applied methodological procedure. Subsequently, the results of the interview study are presented, comparing internal and external ways of sustainability communication. Finally, the results are discussed, limitations and implications based on the applied empirical approach and its insights are derived, and ideas for future research are highlighted.

2. Background

The following section presents the theoretical background of the present study, starting with the current handling of sustainability in companies. Subsequently, research on internal and external sustainability communication in companies is highlighted, leading to the research gaps and research questions the conducted empirical study has been focusing on.

2.1. Companies and Sustainability

Before delving deeper into corporate sustainability communication, a clear definition of the term sustainability is required. Sustainable development has been understood as meeting current needs without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs; see the widely recognized Brundtland report [8]. Within this report, three essential dimensions of sustainability are considered: ecological, social, and economic facets of sustainability. In summary, sustainability involves the responsible, efficient, and equitable management of resources across all three dimensions. Thereby, ecological sustainability entails addressing challenges such as species conservation, whereas social sustainability encompasses all aspects that support and protect individuals. Lastly, economic sustainability focuses on promoting economic systems that can endure long-term within ecological limits without exploiting resources.

With regard to sustainability management and communication in companies, these three dimensions are also considered. Thereby, research focuses on ecological or environmental sustainability being frequently part of technical reports or life cycle analyses and management in companies [9]. Previous research examined which sustainability dimensions are prioritized based on interviews and document analysis in different companies in Germany [10]. As a result, the weighting of the sustainability dimensions was identified to be diverse and dynamic, suggesting that the influence of external stakeholders, such as the public, bank, or customers, should be considered in more detail. When sustainability in companies is examined, corporate social responsibility (CSR) is a central and relevant term, describing the impacts of the company's activities on its stakeholders, the environment, and society, as well as the extent to which these activities are successful considering environmental, ethical, social, and economic perspectives [11,12].

The terms CSR, sustainability, sustainability development, or corporate sustainability are often used interchangeably [13], whereas research increasingly considers sustainability from a CSR perspective, e.g., through CSR reports [14]. In recent years, various countries, such as Germany, implemented a legal framework in terms of CSR reporting obligations for companies [15]. In this regard, CSR is increasingly important, as previous research revealed that CSR leads to more sustainable behavior of employees [16]. However, the actual implementation depends on employee awareness and perception of environmental and sustainability issues [17]. Therefore, it is very important to inform own employees internally about the company's activities and goals and to motivate them to actively participate [18].

Focusing on CSR communication, previous business research criticized the lack of sufficient scientific knowledge about sustainable themes or approaches and research primarily serving business interests rather than societal interests [19,20]. Further, it is striking

that research predominantly focuses on analyses of CSR reports [21] and media coverage investigating, for example, the communication of the reporting of the UN's 17 Sustainable Goals or the way media reports on the topic of sustainability in general [22]. In contrast, detailed empirical investigations of real communication processes in companies are sparse.

2.2. Internal Sustainability Communication in Companies

Looking at internal sustainability communication within companies, communication among employees is focused on research, which can be informal but also directed through various channels to convey sustainability concepts and values. Internal CSR communication includes the communication of narratives related to sustainability and corporate responsibility [23]. Typical communication channels include all internal channels such as the intranet, employee magazines, sustainability reports, or brochures. Internal CSR communication often depends on managers as multipliers, who have a significant influence on direct communication and must closely monitor narratives and discourses. Such multipliers, also called internal change agents, are generally described as employees of a company who are proactively involved in the management innovation [24].

Previous research identified a lack of empirical studies comparing different employee groups and unofficial versus official stories and focusing in detail on internal CSR communication processes [25]. In an exemplary study on storytelling in internal CSR communication within large insurance companies, expert interviews were conducted with professionals from different companies in order to investigate the concepts of sensemaking and sensegiving within narrative CSR communication [26]. It was found that different narratives are used in companies but are not always in line with employees' perceptions, e.g., "the company as 'CSR leader'", "sustainability as self-interest" or CSR "as competitive advantage". Explanations and reasons included limited discussions in regular internal communications outside of specific channels, such as the website, and the focus of communications on reporting on actions rather than actively engaging employees [25]. These studies also highlighted the importance of "linking sustainability to the overall strategic direction of the company for effective internal CSR communication" (p. 454). It was concluded that while factual information is crucial, storytelling, e.g., through sensemaking, holds even greater potential for CSR communication [26]. Only a few studies focused on the perception of sustainability communication from the perspective of the company's employees. However, it was identified that employees have a high level of awareness on sustainability issues and initiatives concerning the company's sustainability activities [27].

In addition, research has shown that internal CSR communication is domain-specific, e.g., environmental or employee-oriented, and that factors such as credibility and fit within the company are crucial for effects such as increased job satisfaction or pride in the company [28]. Furthermore, a literature review identified the credibility of sustainability values among employees as a significant factor and result of effective storytelling, which could even increase the external impact of the company [6]. In this context, internal storytelling is generally seen as a measure to increase belonging and loyalty, as well as an effective, engaging, and motivating communication method [6,26,29,30]. This is consistent with trends regarding narratives, which may include characteristics such as liveliness, attention, better memory, and higher self-efficacy expectations. Caution is advised, however, due to conflicting results and a lack of statistical certainty. Internal stories can also have simplifying or emotionalizing effects and contribute to change [25,31]. However, negative effects can also occur when employees' perceptions and experiences of communication do not match or diverge [6,26]: Narratives are sometimes perceived as less informative, which may be a reason for highlighting potential dangers in the corporate context, such as the misleading consequences of persuasiveness, one-sidedness, or lack of authenticity in poor storytelling, leading to different interpretations by narrators (e.g., [6]).

2.3. External Sustainability Communication in Companies

For external communication, it has been hypothesized that CSR storytelling has positive effects on the corporate brand and that corporate social responsibility can serve as a differentiating factor [32]. In general, sustainability communication aims to inform various external stakeholders about the efforts and activities of the company or engage in a dialogue with the public [33,34]. Annual reports, letters, company websites, social media pages, and newspapers or business magazines are mentioned as exemplary channels for the external communication of stories [35]. Stories can be used to simplify complex relationships and provide meaning [23].

Previous research identified the relationship between the extent of communication (e.g., on websites, Twitter, Facebook) and the scope of CSR activities as an influencing factor for the success of external CSR communication [36]. In this regard, various studies revealed that transparency, especially regarding who benefited from CSR efforts and how, was crucial and represented the foundation of good CSR communication [33,37]. Focusing on social media as a platform for CSR communication, previous research revealed improved empathy, interactivity, and visualization of statements as relevant advantages [38–40].

Besides CSR communication on social media, sustainability reports represent a central way of external CSR communication. CSR reports are often analyzed as databases for investigating sustainability communication [21,22]. As one example of a linguistic discourse analysis study, three climate reports from major energy companies were analyzed, revealing three key communication concepts that emphasize either risks, opportunities, or responsibilities in integrating climate change into strategic statements [41]. In addition to linguistic examinations, other disciplines also focused on CSR reports and investigated the use of storytelling approaches. As one approach, research identified the hero's journey toward sustainability as the central narrative form of choice for a variety of companies [42]. Confirming these results, other studies identified the usage of visual storytelling as an additional element in CSR reports [35] and revealed that images are used to establish the CSR concept as true and real [43]. Whereas research highlighted the choice of positive phrasing and storytelling about employees and impact areas as strategies in CSR reports [44], studies also identified "would be" narratives and a lack of plot structure within the applied stories [45].

2.4. Research Gaps, Aim, and Questions

Summarizing the current state of research on CSR communication, in the last decade, efforts into investigating communication structures and processes have increased. However, the majority of studies in this field (a) separately investigated internal or external CSR communication and its characteristics, focused (b) on CSR reports or media coverage, and (c) rarely realized empirical studies referring to the perspectives and perceptions of the companies' employees. Hence, a direct comparison and investigation of communicative elements and strategies in internal and external CSR communication based on the perspectives of employees is still missing.

Therefore, this empirical study aims at a direct comparison of internal and external communication with a specific focus on addresses, channels, structure, and content of communication. For this purpose, elucidating the understanding and significance of sustainability within companies and how sustainability goals are communicated internally and externally is essential in a first step:

- RQ1: What is the status of sustainability in companies?

Further, it is crucial to examine the methods employed to communicate sustainability internally and externally:

- RQ2: How is sustainability communicated?

Finally, the effects of sustainability communication within organizations have to be analyzed, and potential areas for improvement have to be identified:

- RQ3: What is the impact of communicating sustainability in companies and how can it be improved?

Based on the analysis of these research questions, internal and external CSR communication can be directly compared, and implications for enhanced sustainability communication in companies can be derived.

3. Materials and Methods

To explore the research questions, a dedicated investigation was conducted in the form of an interview study. This qualitative approach was chosen as the appropriate research method since previous research predominantly focused on analyses of sustainability reports and media, and research has hardly included the perspective of employees in companies so far. As empirical insights on the perspectives of employees were sparse, it was necessary to identify relevant factors related to the perception of and experiences with internal and external sustainability communication as a first step. Only based on this qualitative identification of relevant factors are further quantitative analyses made possible. Therefore, and due to the exploratory nature of the research intent, a qualitative interview study was chosen. The specific study design, data collection procedures, and characteristics of the interview participants are described below.

3.1. Study Design

The interviews were conducted using a semi-structured interview guideline. The interviews started with general questions about the participants themselves (e.g., professional background), their individual understanding of sustainability, and the company the participants are working for (e.g., duration of employment). The focus then shifted to sustainability within the company, asking for the company's sustainability strategies and potential investments as well as the company's sustainability goals and their communication. In the second part of the interviews, processes and structures of sustainability communication were brought into focus (i.e., addresses of communication, communication channels, structure, and content of communication), whereas the same questions were posed for internal and external communication. The last part included a section for the participants' self-assessment and evaluation of the company's efforts and personal motivation. In more detail, the participants were asked to assess the company's sustainability strategies by commenting on the impact the current communication of sustainability might have. In addition, the participants were asked to specify potential improvements related to the communication of sustainability in their company.

The interviews took place in May of 2023 via Microsoft Teams or Zoom. Prior to the start of the interviews, a pretest was conducted, resulting in minor adjustments. The interviews were audio-recorded. On average, the interviews lasted about 60 min. All participants read and signed data protection declarations.

3.2. Data Acquisition and Analysis

The recorded audio files were transcribed using the software MAXQDA (version 2018). Subsequently, the interview data were analyzed applying a qualitative content analysis [46]. By means of MAXQDA software, a combination of a deductively and inductively created category system was realized. After using the interview guide to deductively create an initial rough category system, the collected data were inductively fine-coded and assigned to the existing system. Coding was extended to multiple categories when contextually and logically appropriate. The synthesis of these fine codes led to the creation of revised subcategories through multiple iterations.

3.3. Characteristics of Participants

All employees of German companies were generally considered as suitable participants, with a focus on those with responsibilities related to sustainability. N = 13 participants took part in the interview study.

The participants' average age was 43.5 (SD = 14.5) years, and the average duration of employment in their current company was 11.8 (SD = 10.7) years. In total, 62% of the respondents were female (38% male). The job title of nine participants (69%) had a direct connection to sustainability. The other two participants also indicated to have roles with responsibilities for sustainability despite having different job titles. Two participants did not have direct relevance to sustainability. Regarding decision-making authority, a predominantly advisory role was attributed to the majority. The 13 respondents worked in 10 different companies across various industries, i.e., production (e.g., furniture, chemicals), education & research, church, and service providers (e.g., IT, marketing research). The size of the companies ranged from 130 to approximately 9000 employees.

4. Results

In the following, the key results of the interview study are presented, focusing on the comparison between internal and external communication in companies.

4.1. Status Quo of Sustainability in Companies (RQ1)

In this section, all results are presented, enabling an understanding of the status quo of sustainability in companies.

4.1.1. Relevance of Sustainability

All participants considered sustainability to be *important* or even *very important* both in everyday life and in the company. In seven interviews, inter-generational justice and a future-oriented view were mentioned in their own definition of sustainability.

"I'm also a mother of two, so I see it as my responsibility to not only watch my own behavior, but also to be a role model, because of course the next generation is going to be much more aware of all this, and of course they're going to have to live with the consequences much more." (female, 40 years)

In around half of the interviews, sustainability was described as a fundamental part of the company's mission statement and values: *"So also very important, absolutely." (male, 50 years)*.

4.1.2. Definition of Sustainability

Three times the Brundtland definition was explicitly mentioned [8]. Half of the interviews also directly mentioned all three dimensions of sustainability. Examples of values, stories, reasons, investments, and motivations for all three dimensions were also given later in the interviews. Combinations of one to three dimensions were described when respondents were asked which dimension was the most common in sustainability communication.

"As I said, everything in our company is also based on the triple bottom line, i.e., social, environmental and economic aspects. We have a sustainability mission statement that addresses various aspects." (female, 30 years)

Environmental sustainability was most frequently addressed both internally and externally. However, social and economic sustainability are also a (partial) focus for half of the companies internally and somewhat less so externally.

4.1.3. Investments in Sustainability and Strategies

Almost half of the investments mentioned are clearly related to the environmental dimension, the majority of which are investments in sustainable mobility. However, time commitment and social inclusion measures were also listed, for example. Other investments included certificates, financing a sustainability department, research investments, compensation lines, and shareholdings.

"On the one hand, as far as major investments are concerned, I would also mention the certificates that we have. We have relevant sustainability certificates [...] and a sustainable

product certificate for furniture. These are considerable sums of money every year and the whole management is behind it, of course it has to be valid, it is checked [...]. The other thing is that we have quite extensive sustainability communication. Of course, this also involves a lot of investment. Also in the sustainability report. Yes, in communication via social media, for example. And we also have large investment projects from time to time, such as a small photovoltaic system that is now being expanded. So there is a lot going on and there will be even more in the future.” (female, 30 years)

When asked whether there was a defined, explicit strategy for these investments and for sustainable development in general, seven respondents answered in the affirmative while one respondent answered in the negative, referring to individual strategic elements. Two companies reported that there was only one sustainability strategy at the parent company. In addition, two interviews used the phrase that sustainability “...should be seen as a marathon and not a sprint.” (female, 60 years)

4.1.4. Goals and Communication of Goals

As with the strategy, the goals also originated from a higher authority, according to two interviews. Six companies reported on having their own collections of goals.

“We have various sustainability goals, which are also publicly available and known within the company. They are revised every few years, also based on a materiality analysis that we do. They go through various departments and are then reviewed again and again and measures are derived.” (female, 30 years)

In one company, this was referred to as “*simply an Excel list*” (male, 50 years). One participant reported two individual goals from the same company. In one interview, no recorded goals were described. Only a few statements were made about communicating the goals. Internally and externally, the website was mentioned as a channel for this, and internally, notices, intranet, newspaper, and meetings were mentioned.

4.1.5. Insufficient Actions

In the majority of the interviews, the participants tended to say that their company was not doing enough for sustainability, partly because you can never do enough for sustainability.

“Here, too, I would say that there is still a lot of potential. That is, yes, against the backdrop of the resources that we have available, you certainly always have to consider that not everything is possible that we would like or that I would like. But even here I would say that there is still room for improvement [...] but maybe that would require more resources.” (female, 40 years)

Only two interviewees were of the opinion that the company was doing as much as it possibly could.

4.2. Communication of Sustainability (RQ2)

The second research question focused on the specific way sustainability is communicated in companies. To elaborate relevant characteristics of the communication, the results are categorized in addresses of communication, channels of communication, and content and strategies of communication.

4.2.1. Addressees of Communication

All mentioned addresses of internal and external sustainability communication are presented in Figure 1. Internally, the interviews revealed that sustainability is/should generally be communicated to all employees.

“So it’s basically for everybody, we don’t make any big distinctions.” (female, 40 years)

Beyond that, the interviewees reported that sustainability communication is partly directed to specific employees depending on department-specific characteristics.

With regard to external communication of sustainability, the participants reported that all stakeholders are generally informed and partly also special target groups. In addition, the interviewees described relevant stakeholders in more detail and referred to customers in the first place, but also investors, banks, cooperating companies, suppliers, the immediate environment, educational institutions, associations, politics, and the public in general.

“As many as possible, in fact. So, of course, we try to address our consumers in a way that clearly communicates the value of sustainability. In general, we try to reach out to all the stakeholders in the industry and try to motivate them to get on board, for example by launching industry initiatives [...] to show them ‘hey, join in’ and share our knowledge. Stakeholders can also be politicians. For example, we are registered in the lobby register and do a lot of work there, especially when it comes to recycling processes. Stakeholder employees, stakeholder the public.” (female, 27 years)

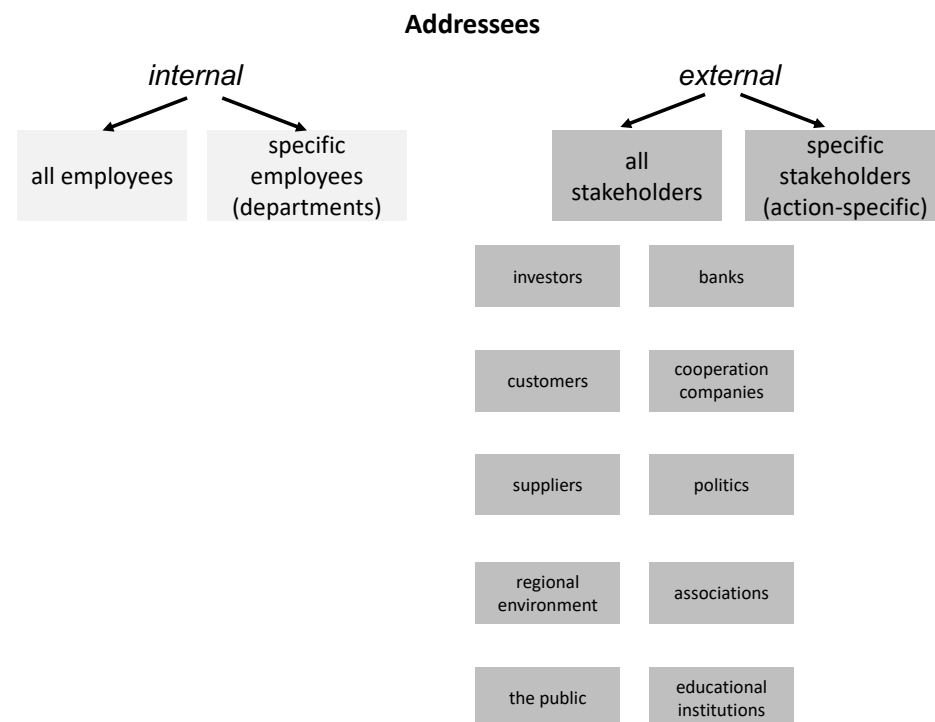


Figure 1. Identified addresses of internal and external sustainability communication.

4.2.2. Channels of Communication

The identified channels of internal and external sustainability communication are illustrated in Figure 2.

In general, digital as well as analog channels of communication were mentioned.

Training courses, workshops, and lectures, in a digital and an analog format, were described as communication channels for both—internal and external communication. In addition, communication on websites/blogs, intranet, via e-mail, and newsletters was also highlighted as relevant for both ways of communication. In line with this, events in presence were also used for internal and external communication (e.g., meetings with customers).

Specifically for external communication, using social media (e.g., LinkedIn, Xing, Facebook, Instagram, Twitter) and being present in videos and TV were also identified as relevant communication channels.

“There is social media, of course, so we do a lot on LinkedIn, for example.” (female, 52 years)

In addition, open databases and specific company reports were used for external sustainability communication.

Internally, the participants reported that (print) information material (e.g., flyers, internal magazines) and information screens are frequently used for sustainability communication within the companies.

“Then we have an employee magazine that comes out once a quarter.” (female, 27 years)

Furthermore, individual employees as multipliers were also mentioned as channels used.

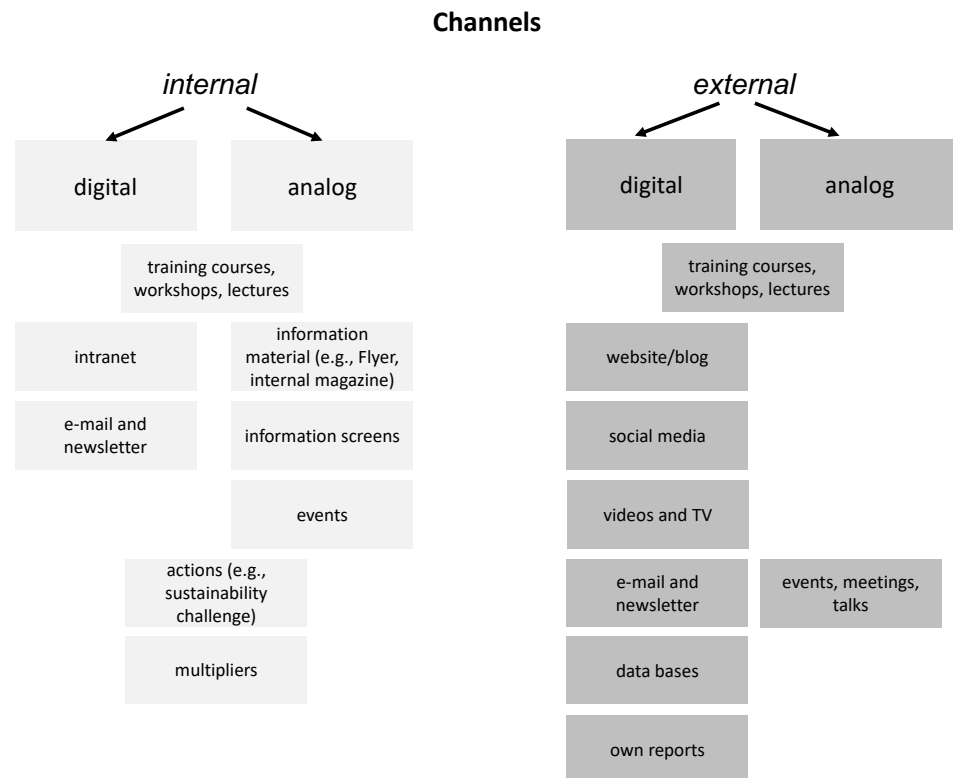


Figure 2. Identified channels of internal and external sustainability communication.

4.2.3. Strategies and Contents of Communication

In the interviews, a wide variety of statements were made about internal and external strategies for communicating sustainability. These can be found in Figure 3.

On the one hand, individual approaches to specific communication channels for internal and external communication were discussed. Participants mentioned differences in the density and clarity of information depending on whether it is communicated on the website, in reports, or in social media.

“So, yes, the only communication that takes place via e-mail, for example, is very product-specific or supplier-specific information that I then pass on or receive. (female, 30 years)

On the other hand, general strategies were reported. With regard to internal communication, the most frequently mentioned strategies were storytelling and education & clarification, followed by positive communication in the sense of describing opportunities and successes—“... more is reported about goals and successes.” (female, 30 years)—using so-called “success stories” (female, 60 years).

When focusing on external communication, these three strategies were also frequently mentioned. However, the strategy of focusing on transparency was most important for external communication, while it was not discussed for internal communication.

“I think we try to be transparent with all topics and it always depends on what it is.” (male, 33 years)

Communicating in a targeted and understandable way was a relevant strategy for both internal and external communication.

“And that is why communication must of course always be tailored to the addressee of the communication.” (female, 52 years)

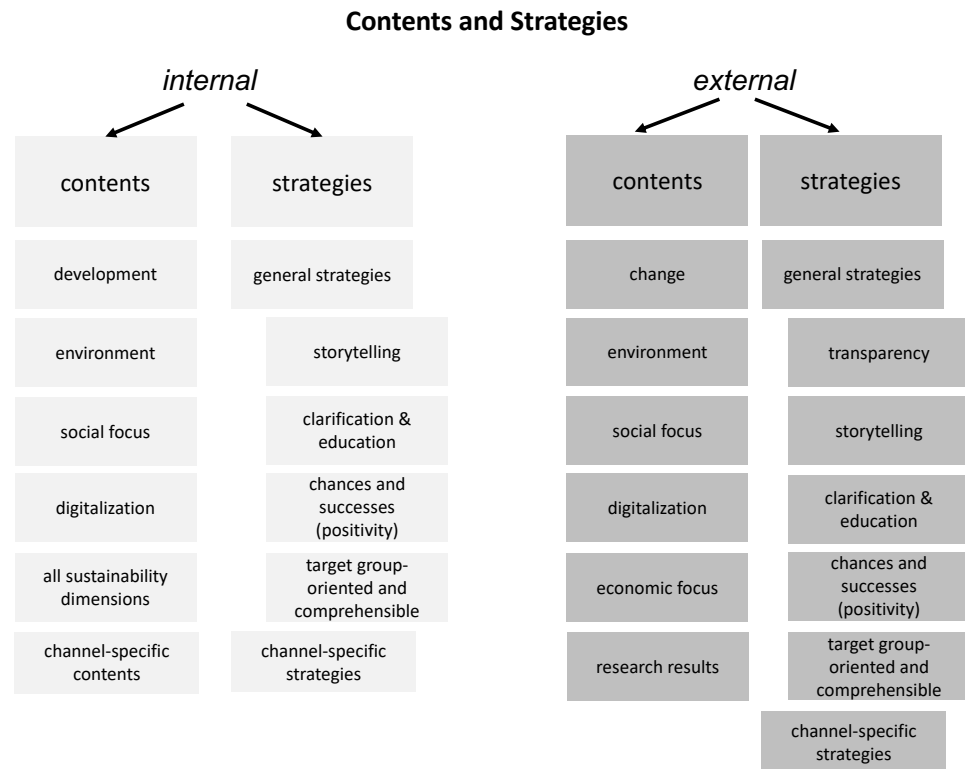


Figure 3. Contents and Strategies of internal and external communication.

Regarding the content of internal communication, participants reported that all of the company’s sustainability dimensions and topics are part of its communication. However, it was also noted that the content communicated varies depending on the communication channel. In particular, information was provided on the company’s sustainability development and targets.

“So they mainly say ‘Ok, how the company is developing, what other goals it has in terms of sustainability and also what the resources are at the moment, what it is simply aiming for’.” (female, 23 years)

In addition, content was communicated with a focus on the environment and climate change.

“So the climate issue is one that is very relevant in the perception of stakeholder employees.” (female, 52 years)

In addition, content with a social focus, such as employee rights and human rights, was provided. Finally, digitization was also presented as an integral part of corporate sustainability communication.

“And I would also say that digitization is a particularly important topic, especially because there is the Hospital Future Act that is currently being implemented, and that plays a very important role.” (female, 23 years)

Focusing on external communication, there are similarities in terms of the relevance of communicating content related to the environment, social focus, and digitization, e.g., *“Then there is the topic of ‘sustainability and IT’.” (male, 59 years)*

There were differences in the extent to which economic content in particular is communicated externally.

“So a lot of external communication is about the ‘functioning circular economy’.” (female, 27 years)

In addition, content is communicated that describes the change and transformation of companies:

“For example, if you look at the structural change activities in the region, the company is very, very committed to that.” (female, 48 years)

Finally, importance is also attached to communicating information about published research results.

4.3. Impact and Potential of Improvement of Sustainability Communication (RQ3)

In addition to the status quo and details of sustainability communication, the participants also discussed and evaluated its impact and potential for improvement (RQ3).

4.3.1. Effects of Communication

As can be seen in Figure 4, positive effects of corporate sustainability communication were identified for both internal and external communication. In contrast, negative effects were identified only for internal communication.

Focusing on the internal communication of sustainability in companies, increased motivation to *strengthen* sustainability efforts was a relevant positive effect of sustainability communication:

“And then you realize that the willingness of the employees is also completely different when you talk about such successes.” (male, 61 years)

Another positive effect referred to a longer period of employment and a stronger sense of belonging within the company.

“And what [...] is perhaps also an effect [...] is the duration of service of our employees. The average is over 15 years, which is a very long time if you compare it with other companies. And I believe that if employees didn’t identify with the company in this way, they wouldn’t stay for so long.” (female, 27 years)

In addition, the participants also described that the sustainability communication was crucial for new employees in the application process.

Internally, negative aspects, especially related to the fact that not enough sustainability communication is realized.

“I think it’s perfectly legitimate to nudge people internally or to say ‘Hm, I personally haven’t gone far enough in some areas, there could be more to come’.” (female, 48 years)

Beyond that, negative aspects such as a higher workload, dissatisfied sales management, or general displeasure were also mentioned.

“They know that it’s important and that it makes sense, but it also often leads to a higher workload and is therefore not always accepted positively.” (female, 30 years)

Externally, the positive effects mentioned related less to company affiliation and identification but more to various types of successes, such as awards, higher market shares as company success, and being *“known as a sustainable company”* (female, 30 years). Contrary to internal communication, negative effects of communicating sustainability were not mentioned in this context.

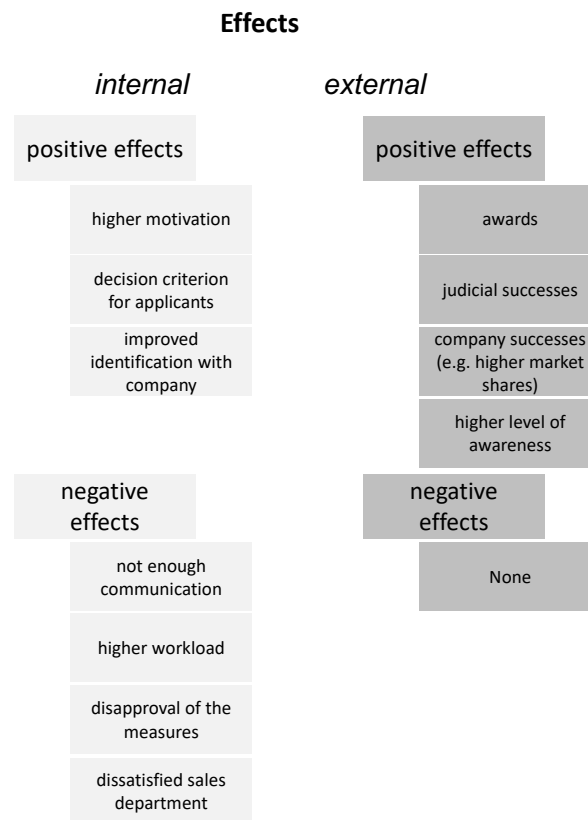


Figure 4. Effects of internal and external sustainability communication.

4.3.2. Potential of Improvements in Communicating Sustainability

In summary, the majority of participants saw room for improvement in both internal and external communication. Regarding internal communication, more communication in general and on specific topics was desired, while some participants expressed satisfaction with the current way sustainability is communicated in their company.

“Because this is such an important and present topic right now, it would be kind of cool if there was more communication. Especially when you’re just starting out. That you are introduced to the topic a little bit.” (female, 23 years)

In addition, there was a desire for more structured and faster ways of internal sustainability communication. In line with the identified improvement potential for external communication, participants expressed a desire for more personal and time resources for both types of sustainability communication.

“We could have done something like this again a long time ago, but we often don’t have the time or the preparation for it.” (female, 30 years)

With regard to external sustainability communication, more communication (both general and specific) was desired, as well as more frequent and more structured implementation. In addition, companies’ own websites for sustainability communication were mentioned as a further communication measure. One respondent would like to see less external storytelling and more documents and information in external sustainability communication strategies.

5. Discussion

The study provided insights into sustainability communication within different companies, comparing internal and external characteristics of communication. In order to investigate how internal and external sustainability communication differs in the companies in terms of communication addressees, channels, contents, strategies, and the effects of

communication, the interview results are now discussed in the context of previous research in the field.

5.1. Sustainability Communication in Companies

Starting with the status quo of sustainability in companies and in line with previous research [27], the results revealed a high relevance of sustainability in the companies, as all participants considered sustainability to be important or even very important in both their personal lives and at work. About half of the interviewees indicated that sustainability is a fundamental part of their company's mission statement and values. Thereby, the Brundtland definition [8] was explicitly mentioned in some interviews. Half of the participants discussed all three dimensions of sustainability—social, environmental, and economic—and many companies included these in their sustainability mission statements. Focusing on investments in sustainability, almost half of the investments discussed focused on environmental aspects, particularly sustainable mobility, while other forms of investment included time commitments, social inclusion, certificates, sustainability departments, and research investments. Despite these efforts, most interviewees felt their companies were not doing enough for sustainability, suggesting there's always room for improvement. In summary, the results indicate that while companies are investing in sustainability and establishing strategies and goals, a general consensus that more could be done remains, with resource constraints posing a challenge to further sustainability efforts.

5.2. Comparing Characteristics of Internal and External Sustainability Communication

The interviews showed that sustainability communication within companies should reach all employees. Partly, internal sustainability communication is intended for everyone without significant distinctions between groups, whereas other interviews revealed that communication might be directed to specific employees based on department-specific characteristics. In contrast, external communication targets a broader range of stakeholders, including customers, investors, banks, cooperation companies, suppliers, the immediate environment, educational institutions, associations, politics, and the general public. Efforts are made to reach as many stakeholders as possible, aiming to motivate them to adopt sustainable practices.

Confirming previous research results [32], the results of the present study show that all companies implemented multimedia for their internal and external sustainability communication. In line with this, the conducted interview study also confirmed that both—internal and external sustainability communication—takes place via a wide range of communication channels. As an example, the here identified way of using multipliers to communicate sustainability internally was also reported in previous research [26]. Taking previous research into account [24], this procedure is going to be a common strategy for implementing development and change in companies, especially within the process of realizing sustainability in companies. In previous studies (e.g., [26]), in particular the intranet and the detailed briefing of employees were highlighted as important. In comparison, internal websites and training courses were also frequently mentioned in the study conducted here, while on-boarding activities were only partially mentioned, and, in addition, the external website was also reported as an important source of information for both external and internal stakeholders.

Numerous strategies were mentioned in the interviews that are used in sustainability communication, including, for example, how elements, e.g., photos, are created to support stories in sustainability reports, confirming previous research [43]. The participants mentioned that internal sustainability communication involves different approaches depending on the channel. For example, emails are often used for product-specific or supplier-specific information, while other internal communication channels might focus on different aspects of sustainability. The most commonly reported internal strategies involved storytelling and education or clarification, e.g., "success stories". These approaches aim to inform and engage employees about sustainability, emphasizing opportunities and successes. While

internal communication focused on storytelling and positive messaging (in line with previous research [6,26]), the results further confirmed previous research by revealing that external communication emphasized transparency [33,37]. Being open and transparent about sustainability initiatives was seen as crucial for external stakeholders, with a participant stating that their approach depends on the topic but generally aims for clarity. The use of different channels for external communication, such as websites, reports, and social media, was noted. A consistent strategy for both internal and external communication was delivering information in a targeted and understandable way.

Thematically, the results showed a tendency towards the ecological sustainability dimension in the communicated contents for both communication directions surveyed. However, the social and economic dimensions are also frequently addressed, often as part of a mix. Reasons for this could be the omnipresence, the risk potential, and the great need for action on the climate issue, as well as legal requirements in this context. The social sustainability dimension was discussed in the form of investments in accessibility and inclusion, or the idea of female managers as role models. In many interviews, however, value was also placed on the holistic view of sustainability, even if it has not always been realized equally. These results confirm and extend previous research in which holistic management was also seen as a central narrative [26].

In a direct comparison, this study's results indicate that sustainability communication within companies aims to be inclusive, targeting all employees, while external communication extends to a wide range of stakeholders, promoting collaboration and broader engagement in sustainability efforts. Both ways of communication have in common that a broad variety of communication channels are used for sustainability communication. The analysis indicated that internal sustainability communication often involves storytelling, education, and positive messaging, while external communication prioritizes transparency and targeted information. Thereby, the use of varied communication channels helps to reach different audiences, with a balance between conveying successes and maintaining transparency about sustainability efforts. Considering the content of sustainability communication, the results suggest that internal communication in companies encompasses a wide range of sustainability topics, with a focus on environmental and climate issues, social content, and digitization. External communication mirrors these themes but also includes additional information about economic sustainability and company transformation. The variety of content across both internal and external communication reflects the diverse aspects of sustainability that companies aim to address and communicate to their stakeholders. Summarizing the insights and characteristics of internal and external sustainability communication, the results indicated that employees perceive internal and external sustainability communication as distinct processes, with a clear differentiation between them. However, the results also suggest that well-functioning, transparent internal communication of sustainability can have a positive effect on external communication. This is mainly due to the fact that sustainability efforts are then perceived as more authentic and can be supported and communicated externally by the employees, driving external communication.

5.3. Discussing the Effects and Improvement Potential of Sustainability Communication

Whether a certain strategy is ultimately used in communication also depends on the effects. In previous research, it has been suggested that CSR generally has a positive effect on the brand and can serve as a differentiating feature. Both are confirmed, for example, in reports on market shares, awareness as a sustainable company, and sustainability concepts as competitive advantages [26]. In more detail, as a significant positive effect of internal sustainability communication, the increased motivation to enhance sustainability efforts was discussed in the interviews. In addition, this study revealed that sustainability communication can lead to longer employee retention and improved sense of identification with the company. Further, the interviews showed that sustainability communication plays an important role in attracting new employees during the application process, indicating its value in recruitment. External sustainability communication's positive effects relate

to various successes, such as receiving awards, gaining higher market shares, and being recognized as a sustainable company. These factors enhance the company's reputation and contribute to its competitive advantage. Discussing negative effects of internal sustainability communication, not enough sustainability communication being implemented, leading to dissatisfaction and a sense that more could be done, was stated as a key negative aspect. Further, internal sustainability communication can result in a higher workload and general displeasure among employees. Overall, these results suggest that sustainability communication has numerous positive effects, both internally and externally, such as increased motivation, company identification, and success in external recognition. However, there are also negative aspects, especially related to internal communication, including a lack of sufficient communication, increased workload, and dissatisfaction. Addressing these negative effects may require balancing the benefits of sustainability communication with the additional demands it can place on employees and management.

The results of the present study highlight areas for improvement in both internal and external sustainability communication within companies. Starting with internal communication, the participants expressed a desire for increased communication on sustainability topics, suggesting that more frequent and detailed information would be beneficial, especially for new employees. There was also a clear preference for more structured and faster internal communication processes, i.e., more efficient ways to share sustainability-related information, indicating that current methods might be too slow or disorganized. In addition, some participants noted that limited personal and time resources restrict their ability to engage in sustainability communication. Similar to internal communication, participants expressed a desire for more frequent and structured external communication. This includes both general and specific sustainability topics. Companies' websites were suggested as a key channel for sustainability communication, providing a platform to share information with a broader audience. Partly, less storytelling in external communication was desired, advocating for more documents and information to offer concrete details and support transparency.

Overall, these results suggest that while there is a general acknowledgment of the importance of sustainability communication, both internal and external communication could benefit from increased frequency, better structure, and more resources. The feedback indicates a desire for efficient communication processes with a balance between storytelling and providing concrete information.

6. Conclusions

Previous research on sustainability communication predominantly focused on either internal or external communication separately and realized analyses of sustainability reports or media analyses. These approaches are useful for examining the raw numbers and tracking developments over time. However, they may not fully capture the human aspect, which is crucial in understanding how employees perceive sustainability communication in their company. Hence, an empirical approach was necessary to include the perspective of employees and gain a deeper understanding of the actual communication of sustainability in companies. Further, this enables a comparison between internal and external communication and, based on this, suggests potential recommendations for future changes. Beyond the insights of previous research, the present study allowed for an overview of the structure and communication characteristics of sustainability communication in companies by providing a first direct comparison of internal and external sustainability communication, which in many cases overlapped significantly. This way, relevant aspects of realizing and communicating sustainability in companies were identified from the perspective of employees, covering real insights from their everyday professional lives. In the following, the limitations of the empirical approach are described, and ideas for necessary and potential future work are derived.

6.1. Limitations of the Empirical Approach

Beyond the insights of this study, there are methodological limitations that should be considered for future research.

In general, a qualitative study with a small sample size is difficult to generalize. Nevertheless, the sample was quite diverse in terms of age, gender, and tenure. While the diversity of industries provided interesting insights for the analysis, it also made comparisons difficult, as only one or two people per industry and company were interviewed. However, the selection of participants covered a sufficient spectrum of industries and expertise as a first empirical study in the field focusing on the perspectives of employees. In future studies, it is possible and would be useful to follow up on these results by conducting quantitative studies focusing on even broader and more balanced samples to quantify current efforts in and ways of sustainability communication.

It should also be noted that, despite the anonymity of the interview data, employees may not be comfortable disclosing certain information or may wish to portray the company in a positive light. To respond to this potential problem, the participants were informed of the complete anonymity of their data and statements before the interview began and were carefully introduced to the topic and the aim of the study. It was emphasized that the study's aim was not to gain insights into their specific company but to identify communication processes at a higher level.

Focusing on employees holding roles with a sustainability focus in the acquisition process made sense, as it allowed for a broader representation of communication structure and content. However, further consideration of average employees could be interesting, especially for analyzing the impact and reception of internal narratives, as sustainability management employees are more likely to be involved in their production.

It should also be noted that the interviews were of considerable length. Prior to the start of the interview, the expected duration was communicated to the participants, and efforts were made to remain within the announced time frame. On the basis of the derived insights, future quantitative studies can be conceptualized in shorter formats, being able to reach a broader sample of participants.

As a last aspect, the applied interview study aimed at reaching respondents from all over Germany, representing a challenge. To respond to this problem, the interviews were conducted via video conference, with only the audio track being recorded, which proved to be a reasonable compromise between face-to-face interviews with respondents from all over Germany and greater anonymity without traveling.

6.2. Outlook and Future Research

Besides the discussed limitations, there are many opportunities for further research, including examining different industries, cultures, specific company sizes, and employees from different departments. In addition, the reliance on legislation, especially with the upcoming expanded CSR reporting requirements, or thematic focuses related to business areas or sustainability dimensions offer numerous questions for research.

Measuring the actual impact of different generic narratives, communication channels, and methods, especially outside of anecdotal reporting, can add significantly to existing research. In this regard, applying quantitative approaches would not only be useful to quantify communication characteristics and efforts but would rather enable analyzing and detecting possible changes in sustainability communication over time.

As further ideas of future research, approaches of particular interest to linguistics, sociology, and psychology could examine individual narrative elements such as the narrative perspective, as well as the attitude-behavior gap. For both, the role of narratives in overcoming them in relation to a company's internal and external stakeholders could be explored. These research areas, in addition to the study presented here, could contribute to a better understanding of corporate sustainability communication. Additional research on specific processes in text production across different text types for different channels, on training and education of multipliers and ultimately society, and on strategic positioning

for sustainable development could also be valuable. Considering the method of storytelling and the use of narratives in all these contexts in the research could provide further insights into the perceived benefits and how stories are used in companies as part of a communication approach, as well as the dangers and limitations of such a method.

As this study showed, successful sustainability communication can have a positive impact on employees. Combined with efforts to raise general societal awareness of sustainability through education and outreach, internal and external sustainability communication can contribute significantly to a more sustainable world and society, alongside sustainable investments and actions. Such an impact is desirable and necessary, especially in view of the current predictions and consequences of climate change and the great responsibility that many companies bear due to high carbon dioxide emissions, but also in view of current human rights violations, social inequalities, and the pervasive discrimination of various marginalized groups within or by companies. This is also of high relevance for society as a whole, in order to enable future generations to have a future worth living (see [8]).

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