Forward Thinking in Building Sustainability Practice in Malaysia: A New Trend in Evaluating the Digital Brand Storytelling in Malaysian Social Enterprise Brand

Muhamad Shahrin, Rosni Ab Wahid, and Azizan Mohamed Isa

ABSTRACT

Covid-19 pandemic had changed the dynamic of brand building landscape and social enterprise requires a new way to build their brand. This study contributes to the advent of digital brand storytelling in marketing and brand building. Digital brand storytelling originated from conventional storytelling methods, that combine all interactive elements such as text, audio, and images to communicate with the consumers. Storytelling has been an effective medium of human communication to convey messages. What makes storytelling so effective that storytelling engenders emotional response, enhancing the brand’s image and creating sustainable consumer engagement. The big bang of the internet provides companies a new avenue to tell consumers the story of their brand. For a company that usually lacks branding such as a social enterprise, knowledge remains scarce about the overwhelming impact of digital storytelling in marketing. This study looks at the elements of signature stories and the role it plays in revolutionizing the whole content of digital marketing strategy. The result of this study will shed solutions to building brand strategy through brand storytelling of social enterprise in Malaysia.

Keywords: Digital brand storytelling, branding, storytelling, consumer engagement, social enterprise, branding, sustainability.

I. INTRODUCTION

Brique Engineering Solutions is a social enterprise that embarks on the effort to supply automated net-hauling devices to help traditional fishers in Miri, Sarawak practice sustainable fishing and the distribution chain to the final consumer. EcoKnights is a non-governmental organisation working with various organisations to drive and empower sustainable actions. The Malaysian government had recognised the role of social enterprise that provides beneficial social impact in creating inclusiveness and equitable society, green growth for sustainability, and increasing human capital development which is in line with the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals (Digital News Asia, 2020).

Social Enterprise in Malaysia is a financially sustainable business entity registered under any written law in Malaysia that promotes social or environmental causes (Malaysian Global Innovation, 2022). Social enterprises are business entities that exist to solve social problems and the same time generates profit through commercial activities to maintain sustainable operations (Nascimento & Salazar, 2020). In pursuing both financial sustainability and making an impact on social issues, social enterprises need to align their mission content and their business practice (Akhmedova et al., 2022). Due to the symbiotic relationship between the social enterprise and the local communities, advancing the interest of the latter is the crux of the social enterprise's financial sustainability (Rozita (a) Uji Mohammed & Cyril Supain (a) Eting, 2022). However, the interaction between the brand and the consumer on social media has an impact on how consumers evaluate the brand (Zhang et al., 2022).

Traditional fishers' problems exist due to poverty, lack of access to basic fishing gears, technical support, and knowledge which resulted in uncertainties in resources, posing myriad challenges to traditional fishers' communities (Journal & Management, 2011). The invasion of trawlers to the near-shore fishery by trawlers also poses a threat to traditional fishers (Sin et al., 2019). Traditional fishers use smaller boats that are traditionally built, with no guidance and approval naval architects harmed their traditional fisher's income and safety (Yaakob et al., 2015). Access to new technology such as new set net fisheries is important to help local traditional fishers to catch fish and can prevent trawl nets from reaching closer to the shore (Rosdi et al., 2021).

Covid-19 pandemic had taught us that sustainable living is vital and the key to achieving sustainable development and higher quality of life is to reduce and eliminate unsustainable patterns of production and consumption (Hayward & Roy, 2019). The misconception of sustainable living is that we need to sacrifice our well-being, not suitable for city lifestyles, exclusive to the rich and ‘greenie’ middle class, and sustainability will erode democracy and individual rights (Butters, 2021). The story of sustainable living tends to focus on green lifestyles and futuristic urban housing concepts while ignoring storylines that suggest far-reaching changes in the society such as emphasis on the distinct self-sufficiently
The automated net-hauling device and 'Project Idin 2.0' on the storage facilities. Hence, the story behind this company is elevating the traditional fishers from poverty.

EcoKnights works on advocating sustainability in community development and education. The educational and awareness-building activities are crafted to change the Malaysian mindset on sustainability. The awareness activities such as workshops, film fests, and fun walks are organised to communicate their messages to the consumers. EcoKnights involved in rehabilitation, restoration, and conservation programs. EcoKnights also believes in effective communication on sustainability-driven content to influence human behaviour.

III. RESEARCH OBJECTIVE

The purpose of this study is to explore the stories told by Brique Engineering Solutions and EcoKnights and to identify the underpinning strategic brand positioning of the company and proposed solutions to the company and other social enterprises.

IV. LITERATURE REVIEW

A. Brand Storytelling

Brand storytelling can be defined as marketing communication that delivers value and emotion through a story to persuade its audience to choose, buy, and use the product (Yueh et al., 2019). The advent of the internet gives the advantage to companies such as social enterprises to emotionally connect with the consumers using storytelling (Kemp et al., 2021). To be emotionally connected with the audience, brands can differentiate themselves from their competitors (Wildies, 2020). There is a positive connection in aligning brands with social issues that are directly related to the product they are selling by adding emotional value using storytelling (Moorhouse & Moorhouse, 2018). Injecting brand storytelling into a social enterprise's integrated marketing communication strategy causes extremely large exposure and engagement with the audience (Mahsan et al., 2020).

B. Brand Story

By studying the plot stories of a brand's digital storytelling, we would be able to analyse the brand’s narrative structural elements (Sanders & van Krieken, 2018). For example, authenticity and humour brand stories proved to have an impact on increasing consumer engagement (Lee & Jeong, 2017). A previous study shows that plot, character, and purpose are critical elements in brand stories (Mills & John, 2020). In scrutinising the effectiveness of brand stories from the branding perspective, marketers need to look at strategic brand stories and tactical brand stories (Fauziah & Fachira, 2021).

1) Strategic Brand Story

A strategic brand story is a combination of branding concepts and communication tools in creating powerful signature stories for a sustainable brand (Akgun et al., 2016). Signature stories involve strategic intriguing and authentic narratives which focus on the brand, relationship with the
customers, and the strategy of the company (Aaker & Aaker, 2016). The crux of a signature brand story is to embed interesting and informative content for the consumers (Hoon & Pritchard, 2021). In creating a signature brand story, the following elements are essentials (Fauziah & Fachira, 2021; Kuhn & Boshoff, 2021):

(a) **Plot**: A interrelated sequence of a story such as beginning, middle, and resolution to cause subconscious emotions among consumers (Belgrade & Puspita, 2021).

(b) **Intriguing**: Intriguing story is fascinating (Esposito, S., 2021), adventure (Wainwright & Alharbi, 2011), and educative (Eanes, 2018) which energise and inspire (Mosseri, 2016).

(c) **Authentic**: Genuine stories resonate with the audience (Sylvia Chou et al., 2011) which causes emotional engagement with the digital communication channel (du Plessis, 2019).

(d) **Involving**: stories get consumers actively involved in the brand’s story (Caple & Knox, 2015).

(e) **Surprise**: Good stories beat expectations, and create suspense, which sparks engagement.

(f) **Visual image**: images play a dominant role in conveying the messages of the story (Sisense, 2020).

(g) **Conflicts**: Conflicts add tension and colour to the story (Lamprell & Braithwaite, 2016). A hero as a central character must overcome the conflicts in the plot (Haggis, 2016).

(h) **Emphatic character**: Storytelling introduces characters that enhance the narratives through a genuine character that conveys the emotional experience to the audience (Bubikova-Moan, 2021).

(i) **Significant challenge**: The challenges faced by the hero character in the story (Sawhney & Goodman, 2021).

(j) **Details**: the details in storytelling give credibility to the arguments in the story (Allagui & Breslow, 2016).

2) **Tactical Brand Story**

A Digital brand story requires a holistic strategy to convey the brand message through digital media in building excitement in the audience (Popovic, 2017). The holistic digital tactics also include offline engagement that can be uploaded as part of digital media content (Seifert & Kwon, 2020). Audience engagement is vital as successful marketing has evolved from product-centric to customer-centric (Lund et al., 2018). In focusing on the audience, engaging with them, encourage the audience to create and share the brand stories on their social media platform (Lai & Liu, 2020). Due to many of the world’s populations is connected to social media where they share their experience and stories which inevitably influence each other's perceptions and purchasing behaviour (Dessart, 2017).

V. **AUDIENCE ENGAGEMENT**

Audience engagement is a result of the psychological state of the interaction between interactive audience experiences with the brand (Wang et al., 2017). Audience who is also potential consumer social media engagement increases brand loyalty ( Voorveld et al., 2018). A previous study confirms that brand stories told on multiple platforms incite social media engagements (Dolan et al., 2019) as each digital platform offers a unique experience (Gomez et al., 2019). The brand stories that contain emotional and rational content have positive effects on audience online engagement (Hootsuite, 2021), giving brands competitive advantages over their competitors (Palinkas et al., 2019).

An engagement rate of less than 1% is considered a low engagement rate, anything between 1% and 3.5% is an average or good engagement rate, 3.5% to 6% shows a high engagement rate, and anything above 6% shows a very high engagement rate (Fauziah & Fachira, 2021). This study uses the following formula to calculate the engagement rate by posts (ER) (Wang et al., 2017):

\[
\text{Average ER} = \frac{\text{Total engagement on a post}}{\text{Count of posts} \times \text{Total followers}} \times 100\%
\]

Total engagement on a post consists of Likes, Comments, Shares, and Views.

VI. **FINDING AND DISCUSSIONS**

A. **Strategic Brand Story**

Table I reflects the summary of signature stories elements for Brique Engineering Solutions and EcoKnights to give a holistic view of their brand identity.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>ELEMENTS OF SIGNATURE STORY</th>
<th>Brique Engineering Solutions</th>
<th>EcoKnights</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>A brand story</td>
<td>Message about modernise traditional fishermen and empowering a sustainable fishing culture</td>
<td>Message to consumers to act on sustainable living.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Tagline</td>
<td>Using a specific hashtag “#Demi laut” in all their postings.</td>
<td>Inspiring sustainable living</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Intriguing</td>
<td>Informative content</td>
<td>Entertaining, interesting, informative content.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Authentic</td>
<td>Setting: office, conferences</td>
<td>Setting: local nature attraction sites, conferences, repost of independent news and articles</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Involving</td>
<td>Content: using official posters, videos, reposting of independent news and articles</td>
<td>Contents: using official posters, videos, IG Live, webinar</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Emphatic character</td>
<td>Character: founder</td>
<td>Character: founder, volunteers, activists.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Conflict and tension</td>
<td>Dominated by information about sustainable fishing.</td>
<td>Involve consumers, for-profit companies, government bodies, and volunteers.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Meaningful challenge</td>
<td>Challenge for solving the traditional fishermen’s poverty problem.</td>
<td>The characters align with each campaign.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Detail surprise</td>
<td>Provide new fishing gear for the traditional fishermen.</td>
<td>A low percentage of Malaysians who has the knowledge and understanding of the impact of sustainable living.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

TABLE I: THE EVALUATION OF SIGNATURE ELEMENTS STORY

DOI: http://dx.doi.org/10.24018/ejbmr.2022.7.3.1458 Vol 7 | Issue 3 | June 2022 315
Brique Engineering Solutions is very consistent in its message on modernising traditional fishermen and empowering sustainable fishing culture. Consistently using the same hashtag of “Demi Laut” in all its caption of the Instagram postings. However, all its contents are in informative formats making it less intriguing to the consumers. The main character featured in most of its brand story is the founder. Stories of the local traditional fishermen are introduced to consumers through various newspaper reports and articles with no follow-up postings on the issues reported by the newspaper.

EcoKnights brand story is about sustainable living for a better future. Most of its Instagram postings are delivered in an entertaining, interesting, and informative manner. The webinar and IG Live can engage the consumers more effectively. However, EcoKnights do not have a specific tagline for all its Instagram postings. Sustainable living is a very general topic. Each Instagram postings try to tackle various sustainable issues such as recycling, climate change, educating consumers on sustainable living, and floods relief efforts. However, EcoKnights can engage its target consumers by featuring its volunteers in its Instagram content.

B. Tactical Brand Story

In the tactical brand story, this study will do benchmarking analysis on both Brique Engineering Solutions and EcoKnights. This study will analyse the strategy to promote the brand to the audience using brand stories tactics.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>TABLE II: TACTICAL BRAND STORY COMPARISON</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Tactical Brand Story &amp; Brique Engineering Solutions &amp; EcoKnights</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Public relation &amp; Founder &amp; Volunteers</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Imagery: photo and video &amp; Tone: warm, bright, colourful &amp; Warm, friendly, in Malaysia,</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Text on photo, graphic, and video content. &amp; Text on photo, graphic and video content. &amp; Text on photo, graphic, and video element content.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Promotion: Instagram, Facebook, Website &amp; Promotion: Instagram, Facebook, Twitter, Vimeo, and Website &amp; Product subscription: Instagram, Facebook, website.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Based on Table II, this study observed that the propensity of Brique Engineering Solutions’ promotion communication is not as extensive compared to EcoKnights. Brique Engineering Solutions do not regularly promote its brand stories. Too much focus on the founder and the brand stories is from the perspective of Brique Engineering Solutions itself. This situation alienated the focus of the brand story which is the local traditional fishermen. None of the digital content features the local traditional fishermen talking about their problems and predicaments. The audience information about the struggle of these local traditional fishermen is through third-party reports featured on Brique Engineering Solutions digital platforms.

EcoKnights is very active in promoting its brand story through multiple digital platforms. The focus is on the volunteers which is the target market of their marketing strategy. The company's digital content is loaded with videos showing volunteers telling the audiences about their experience participating in EcoKnights’ events. EcoKnights is consistent in its promotions even during Covid-19 with various online talks and webinars.

However, if we look at the series of events organised by EcoKnights throughout 2021, it touches on other issues such as hygiene kits distributions to the homeless, webinars on the decision-making process, and women empowerment which may not be directly related to sustainable living. As most of EcoKnights' activities focus on the environment, the audience may be confused with the diverse messages.
This calculation is based on the posting in the year 2021 counting the average number of Likes, comments, and views. EcoKnights have a good engagement rate of 1.9% (Fauziah & Fachira, 2021). A good engagement rate shows that EcoKnights brand story is well received by the audience. A high engagement rate also shows EcoKnights is posting valuable digital content. The combination of informative content with entertaining and interesting content keeps its audience engaged. By featuring the volunteers in most of its content, EcoKnights can effectively align and communicate its brand story with its target audience.

Brique Engineering Solutions have an above-average engagement rate of 8.2%. The high percentage may not accurately reflect the effectiveness of its digital brand story strategy. Brique Engineering Solutions only have 70 followers on its Instagram accounts and posted a lower number of contents in 2021 compared to EcoKnights. Based on its Instagram posting, Brique Engineering Solutions’ story seems to be losing its plot. This study also observed that Brique Engineering Solutions did not allow its audience to voice out their experience with the events organised by the organisation. This gives the subtle message that the audience is not important. When the audience became disinterested, they became disengaged, and the message of the brand story will be ignored.

VII. BUSINESS SOLUTIONS

Brique Engineering Solutions benchmarking analysis indicates various weaknesses in its brand story strategy. The lack of digital promotion efforts is the missing link between its tactical brand story to strengthen its signature story. The following are some suggestions that can be adopted by social enterprises to ramp up their brand story strategy:

(a) To emotionally connect deeply with the consumer by revisiting its narrative on the sustainable issues. Make the consumers core to the brand story.

(b) Coming up with thought-provoking, interesting, and entertaining content.

(c) Put the beneficiaries as the main character of the brand story to give more emotional impact to the audience. Power of human voice is an effective way to connect with the consumers.

(d) To increase volunteers’ motivation by having volunteers taking over the Instagram postings.

(e) Give the consumers clear and easy instruction to act either to buy the product or contribute to the social cause promoted by the brand.

VIII. CONCLUSION

This study analyses the key elements of signature brand elements and investigates how these elements influence the social enterprise branding process. This study raises understanding of the influence of brand stories on their target groups. The analysis of this study suggests that the signature brand story influences the effect and cognition of the audience to create a distinctive and authentic social enterprise brand. From the industry viewpoint, the result of this study can assist marketers and founders of social enterprises to plan their social initiatives to attract more volunteers and audiences who subscribe to their social cause.

Social enterprises must carefully plan their branding strategy. Moreover, social enterprise survival depends on the support of the consumers to subscribe to the social ideas and buy their products. The audience of its digital platform is vital to spread the social brand story to the masses. The social cause is the competitive advantage of social enterprises in making themselves unique, and different from normal enterprises. It will be a lost opportunity for social enterprises if they cannot effectively integrate the social cause into their brand story strategy.

This study revealed the role affecting the effectiveness of storytelling in social enterprise marketing. It is pertinent to communicate to the audience success stories, newer pieces of knowledge, and important issues in social issues. The signature story elements affect the brand story strategy. Conceptually, storytelling strategy in marketing is a novel idea, more advanced than traditional marketing. This study fills the gap on the existence of a potential relationship between signature brand story elements, brand story strategy, and brand awareness that can be referenced for future studies.

CONFLICT OF INTEREST

Authors declare that they do not have any conflict of interest.

REFERENCES


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DOI: http://dx.doi.org/10.24018/ejbmbr.2022.7.3.1458

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