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STORYTELLING AND CORPORATE SOCIAL RESPONSIBILITY REPORTING:

A CASE STUDY COMMENTARY ON UK FOOD RETAILERS

Peter Jones and Daphne Comfort

Abstract

Stories, in one form or another, are probably as old as the human race, but in recent years, businesses have increasingly come to recognise the importance of storytelling. The aim of this paper is to offer an exploratory commentary on how storytelling is employed in the corporate social responsibility reporting process by the leading UK food retailers. The paper begins with an outline of the characteristics of storytelling within the corporate world, reviews the ways storytelling is employed by the UK's top ten food retailers' as part of their corporate social responsibility reporting processes. The paper identifies a number of storytelling formats, including photographs and images, video clips, messages and cameo case studies, used by the selected UK food retailers, and offers some reflections on their current approaches to storytelling. While the stories employed by the selected retailers often have a strong human impact and can strike emotive chords, the authors would argue that stories can, at least partly, be misleading in that they do not necessarily fully reflect a retailer's corporate social responsibility record.

Keywords Stories, storytelling, corporate social responsibility, UK food retailers.

Introduction

Storytelling - simply defined as the cultural and social activity of sharing stories - is as old as the human race and is certainly much older than recorded history. Stories can be told in a variety of ways including pictures and photographs, conversations, presentations, letters, audio and visual recordings and increasingly social media, and their power is widely recognised. Osman (2014), for example, argued *'transcending barriers of language and culture, storytelling is one of the oldest art forms in history, utilised to transmit cultural, moral and complex information in a simple, engaging and meaningful manner.'* Storytelling is embedded in people's everyday lives, and in recent years, there has been increasing recognition of the role of storytelling in the business world. PricewaterhouseCoopers (2017), for example, suggested that *'storytelling is one of the most powerful tools available to effective communicators'* and Gupta (2015) argued that *'stories are an effective tool in the strategy process and for communicating and achieving strategic objectives.'* In examining storytelling in business intelligence Elias et al. (2013), argued that *'stories help us to communicate knowledge, share, and interpret experiences.'* More specifically Johansen and Nielsen (2012), explored how storytelling can contribute to corporate social responsibility and Garcia-Rosell (2017) examined *'the possibilities and challenges of using stories as vehicles for critically evaluating contemporary business practices and testing the moral and political boundaries of corporate social responsibility.'*

During the last two decades European and US retailers have taken an increasing interest in corporate social responsibility and they have publicly reported on their corporate social responsibility strategies and achievements (e.g. Lee et al. 2009; Jones et al. 2013). However, the role of storytelling in the corporate social responsibility process within the retail industry has received little or no attention in the academic literature. Food retailing is

by far the largest element within the UK's retail economy and in recent years, the role of the UK's major food retailers has attracted often heated debate and discussion. On the one hand, the marked concentration within food retailing within the UK has increased the power, and arguably the control, of the leading food retailers over producers and suppliers within the supply chain. On the other hand, the large food retailers are widely recognised to have a significant and widespread impact on the environment, economy and society. As such the large food retailers within the UK have attracted considerable attention, and at times considerable criticism, from investors, governments, customers and pressure groups and in the media. At the same time, the large food retailers have been active in developing, and reporting, on corporate social responsibility strategies designed to manage and mitigate their supply chain relationships and their environmental, social and economic impacts. With these observations in mind, the aim of this exploratory commentary paper is twofold. Firstly, to provide a range of illustrations of the ways in which a number of the leading UK food retailers have employed storytelling as part of the corporate social responsibility reporting process. Secondly, to offer some reflections on current approaches to storytelling in corporate social responsibility reporting within the retail sector of the economy.

Storytelling in the Business World and in Retailing

Storytelling has its roots in the origins of human civilisation and has traditionally been used to share, and pass on, knowledge, values, myths, legends, fables and religious beliefs, from one generation to another and across geographical space. Initially storytelling was conducted through drawings and word of mouth communication though over time the written, and then the printed, word became an increasingly important storytelling medium. More recently, developments in information and communication technologies, particularly social media, have seen storytelling become an increasingly all pervasive and all embracing experience. In many ways, stories inform and illuminate all walks of life and in recent years, storytelling has become increasingly important in the business world and in many of the sub disciplines of business and management.

At the macro, level Gill (2015) defined *'corporate storytelling'* as *'the process of developing and delivering an organisation's message by using narration about people, the organisation, the past, visions for the future, social bonding and work itself, in order to create new point-of-view or reinforce an opinion or behaviour.'* At the sub discipline level, in the financial world, for example, Markey-Towler (2017) claimed that *'governments and investors ignore the power of storytelling at their peril. The financial markets are not driven by interest rates and money alone. They are driven by one of the most ancient traditions of humanity – stories. We can lead an investor to liquidity but we can't make them drink without telling them a story about why it is so very tasty.'* Savita et al. (2011), recognised that storytelling in knowledge management is a powerful management tool, and explored the role of storytelling in the context of information systems. Weissenfeld et al. (2017), argued that *'storytelling is used in order to transport a complex content more vividly to the audience and to ensure that the audience remembers the content as long as possible.'* Kent (2015), argued *'storytelling is a staple of public relations, from crisis to branding, to identity to reputation.'* In emphasising the importance of storytelling in marketing, Hammond (2017), argued that *'storytelling is a strategy that brands utilize in order to help their target audiences not only to learn about their products and services but also to form an emotional connection that will lead them to remain loyal to their company for years to come.'*

A number of benefits have been claimed for storytelling within the business world. Storytelling is seen to be important in linking a wide range of business challenges and opportunities to everyday human experiences and in helping to generate emotional connections with companies and in giving them a human face. Many good, arguably the best, stories are memorable and thus not only the story itself, but also the message behind the story, can help to sustain positive views of a business and its operations and behaviours. Stories can be important in disseminating and sharing a company's values, which may be built on founding philosophies and achievements, and in helping to enhance these values in future business development trajectories. More specifically, stories can be important, not only in developing awareness and understanding of a company's values and commitments to a wide range of stakeholders, but also in helping to engender stakeholders' trust in these values and commitments. Ultimately, and ambitiously, there is the belief that stories can be inspirational and that they can have the power to encourage and stimulate changes in behaviour. In summarising the benefits of 'corporate storytelling', Gill (2015), suggested that *'stories can be used in organisations as a means to motivate people and create a message memorable enough for people to take cause and action, if there is an identified interest to the listener.'* Further Gill (2015), claimed that stories have *'universal appeal to culturally diverse audiences who have a range of interests and learning styles.'*

Within the retail industry, storytelling has long been used to enable retailers to forge strong relationships with their customers. Here storytelling is seen to be important in that it enables retailers to forge strong bonds with their customers and for customers to feel connected to the retail brand. As such, storytelling is seen to be vitally important in conveying what the retail brand stands for, and the provenance of that brand and its goods and services. At the same time, storytelling can not only educate, entertain and engage but also appeal to customers' emotions. Social media plays an increasingly important part in the storytelling process in that it encourages customers to take an active role in sharing retail experiences. Academic research into the role of storytelling in retailing has been limited but an experimental study by Gilliam and Zablah (2013) suggested that product stories told from a business point of view were likely to be most effective in influencing customers' purchasing intentions in one time sales encounters. More generally, Gilliam et al. (2014) identified a number of dimensions of retail storytelling, including story relevance, story humour and storytelling ability and explored how they influenced consumer behaviour. Within the retail industry itself, in November 2017 Marketing Week (2017) announced that *'a study of UK brands finds Marks and Spencer is the best retailer for storytelling.'* In examining the power of storytelling for Lush, the UK based handmade cosmetics retailer, Matheny (2015) described how the company's *'Oxford Street store pulls back the curtain to reveal the brand's mission and unveils its story through an immersive sensorial experience.'*

Frame of Reference and Method of Enquiry

In an attempt to illustrate the ways in which storytelling has been employed in the corporate social responsibility reporting process by food retailers within the UK, the top ten UK food retailers (prior to the Sainsbury's /Asda merger announced in April 2018), as measured by turnover, namely, Tesco, Sainsbury's, Asda, Morrisons, Aldi, The Co-operative, Marks and Spencer, Waitrose, Lidl and Iceland, were selected for study (Retail Economics 2018). Tesco, for example, is the UK's largest retailer, with some 3,400 stores and over 310,000 employees and it trades from hypermarket, superstore, and convenience store

formats and increasingly online. Tesco was founded in 1919 as a group of market stalls and the first Tesco shop was opened in North London in 1931. Sainsbury's, Marks and Spencer, Morrisons and the Co-operative were founded in the nineteenth century while Aldi and Lidl, both German based discount retailers, who opened their first stores in the UK in 1990 and 1994 respectively, are relative newcomers to the UK's retail environment. Asda was founded in 1949, but became a subsidiary of Walmart, the world's largest retailer in 1999, Waitrose, founded in 1901 is the food retail division of the John Lewis Partnership, while Iceland, which specialises in the sale of frozen food and prepared meals and vegetables, was founded in 1970. Taken together the ten companies dominate the food retailing market within UK, accounting for over 90% of all food sales and as such they might be seen to reflect cutting edge and innovative approaches to corporate social responsibility reporting.

While companies have employed a range of methods to report on their corporate social responsibility commitments and achievements, publication on corporate websites has become the most popular and the most accessible reporting mechanism (Morhardt 2009). With this in mind, the authors conducted an Internet search for information, using the key phrase 'corporate social responsibility report' and the name of each of the selected retailers. This search was conducted in April 2018, using Google as the search engine. The search revealed that the selected companies report on their corporate social responsibility commitments and achievements in a number of ways. Some of the selected companies namely Morrisons, The Co-operative, Waitrose, as part of the John Lewis Partnership, and Lidl posted a formal report; Sainsbury's, Tesco, Aldi posted updates on their corporate social responsibility commitments and achievements; Asda and Marks and Spencer posted a series of thematic reports, for example, focused upon farming, the company's carbon footprint, biodiversity and community engagement; and Iceland posted limited information on a range of issues including animal welfare, supporting the community, responsible sourcing and environmental protection.

This material on corporate social responsibility provided the empirical source for this paper and unless specifically cited all quotations are drawn from this material. In reviewing the material on corporate social responsibility posted by the selected companies, the authors were essentially guided by loose grounded theory. More specifically, the authors pursued an interpretivist approach in looking to explore how storytelling had been incorporated into corporate social responsibility reporting. The specific examples and selected quotations drawn from the storytelling elements are used for illustrative purposes, with the principal aim being on reviewing the ways the selected retailers employed storytelling in the corporate social responsibility reporting process. The focus was not on providing a comparative evaluation of how the UK's leading retailers employed storytelling within the reporting process.

The paper is based on information that is in the public domain and the authors took the considered view that they did not need to contact the selected retailers to obtain formal permission prior to conducting their research. When outlining the issues of reliability and validity in relation to information drawn from the Internet, Saunders et.al. (2009) emphasised the importance of the authority and reputation of the source and the citation of a specific contact individual who might be approached for additional information. In reviewing the corporate social responsibility material, the authors were satisfied that these two conditions were met. At the same time the authors recognise that their study has its

limitations not least that it is based on authors' designation and interpretation of the storytelling elements in these reports. That said the authors believe that their approach is appropriate in what is an exploratory study.

Findings

All the top ten UK food retailers, with the exception of Iceland, employed storytelling to illustrate their corporate social responsibility commitments and achievements though there were marked variations in the extent to which stories were used. A number of themes can be identified. At the general level, the corporate social responsibility reports, thematic reports and updates are themselves stories, as explicitly titled by some of the selected retailers. In its *'corporate responsibility and society'* update for the third quarter of 2017, Sainsbury's, for example, provided links to outline its achievements in helping customers to cut down food waste, inspiring children to lead healthier lives and working in the community with local charities under the banner *'Our Stories.'* In illustrating its *'5 corporate responsibility principles'*, to *'our customers'*, *'our environment'*, *'our supply chain'*, *'our people'*, and *'our colleagues.'* Aldi, simply said *'This is our story'* as the introduction to a number of links to outline the company's achievements in addressing some of these responsibility principles.

More specifically, photographs and images, video clips, personal messages and cameo case studies were widely used, often in combination, in the corporate social responsibility material posted by the selected retailers. Photographs and images were a widely used method to tell stories and they were employed in a variety of ways. The first page of Tesco's 2016 update on its corporate responsibility commitments, for example, was taken up by a photograph of a man working at the company's Community Food Connection partner charity at the Bethel Christian Centre in Dagenham. The story here was to reinforce Tesco's commitment to addressing food waste and to its support for food surplus donation programmes. In a similar vein the first page of Asda's thematic report on *'Sustainable Water'* included a photograph of a stream flowing through a green rural landscape and here the story was one of harmony with nature. The front page of The Co-operative's 2017 *'Ethics and Sustainability Performance Report'*, included photographs of company employees on a community programme, a number of wind turbines and a female agricultural worker on a African farm and here the story was to provide an initial signal of the company's commitment to the environment, the community and its international supply chain. Tesco's update on its environmental strategy was prefaced by an underwater photograph of a shoal of fish designed to complement the story of the company's commitment to natural ecosystems.

Photographs and mages were also widely used to illustrate a number of specific social, economic and environmental themes as part of the corporate social responsibility reporting process. Lidl, for example, illustrated its commitment to sourcing local produce with a photograph of daffodils in a wooden crate which bears the stamps with the slogan *'Back British Farming'* framed in a Union Jack and a Union jack in a heart shaped image in the popular *'I Love You'* style. On the same page, an image of a box of fresh tomatoes, garlic cloves, carrots, radishes and spring onions illustrated Lidl's *'focus on health and wellbeing'* and its commitment to reduce salt and sugar intake, to encourage healthier eating and to

promote physical exercise. Morrisons illustrated its commitment to *'help British farmers to be competitive, profitable and sustainable'* with pictures of sheep and cattle grazing naturally. Waitrose's description of its commitment to *'source and sell with integrity'* was illustrated by a photograph of a named lamb supplier pictured holding a traditional shepherd's crook in front of a flock of sheep in a rural landscape.

A number of the selected retailers used photographs and images in describing their commitment to their workforce. Sainsbury's, for example illustrated its commitment to harness *'the talent, creativity and diversity'* of *'our colleagues'*, with a number of photographs of smiling employees in their uniforms within the workplace environment. Morrison's commitment to *'look after our colleagues'* was illustrated by photographs of a smiling checkout operator scanning products and of two employees smiling and seemingly chatting while refilling shelves in store. In reporting on *'supporting our colleagues'*, Lidl included photographs of a group of employees in a distribution centre and of a smiling employee adding a plant to a store display. The Cooperative illustrated its commitment to diversity and inclusion with a photograph of a group of colleagues participating in the company's *'Diversity and Inclusion Pioneers'* programme in a seminar room. The general story here is of a relaxed and happy working environment which offers a range of personal and professional development opportunities. Photographs were also used to emphasise the ways in which a number of the selected retailers work with communities as part of their corporate social responsibility commitments. Morrisons, for example, included photographs of a group of employees who had participated in a Sue Ryder Charity Cycle Event astride exercise bikes and holding collecting buckets.

In a three minute video clip accessed from the Sainsbury's update, Paul Mills-Hicks, the company's Food Commercial Director, described the importance and relevance of sourcing with integrity. Within this clip Paul Hicks-Mills claimed that *'sourcing with integrity is at the heart of what differentiates us as a business'* and he outlined the company's commitment to sourcing British products where possible and he encouraged all the company's employees to familiarise themselves with the *'stories'* of sourcing with integrity and to promote these stories not only with customers but also with their family and friends.' In another video clip, John Rogers, Sainsbury's Chief Financial Officer, recognised the range of impacts the business has not only on the national, but also the global, environment, and he outlined how the company was taking responsibility for mapping and managing these impacts and a number of the specific initiatives the company was taking to reduce carbon emissions, water use and food waste. Lidl employed a video clip in which James Morrell, an agronomist on a 1,500 acre farm in Eastern England, reported that the farm had a *'good working relationship'* with Lidl, supplying the retailer with up to 20 types of vegetables, particularly kale and broccoli, and that it generated all its own electricity from waste. Aldi employed a 3 minute video clip, which features both senior executives and employees, from the Joseph Heler Cheese company at Nantwich in Cheshire. The video clip describes the company's traditional approach to cheese making and its good 30 year working relationship with Aldi.

Messages both from company employees and people working with the selected retailers were a prominent element of the corporate social responsibility reporting process. Perhaps the potentially most powerful messages, were from the Chief Executives of the

selected retail companies. In his *'A Word from the Chief Executive Officer'*, by way of an introduction to Lidl's 2016/2017 Sustainability Report, Christian Hartnagel, photographed in a distribution centre, emphasised the company's commitment to *'sourcing our products responsibly, buying British, tackling food waste and helping our customers to lead more active and healthy lifestyles.'* In his contribution to Tesco's update on its corporate responsibility commitments, Dave Lewis, Group Chief Executive, renewed his company's commitment to the United Nations Global Compact, which encourages businesses worldwide to adopt sustainable and socially responsible policies. More specifically, Dave Lewis argued *'it is unquestionable in my mind that Tesco has a responsibility to make a positive difference, taking small steps to help make sure that future generations have the same, if not better, opportunities than we do today.'*

In his *'Chief Executive Introduction'* to Morrison's 2016-2017 Corporate Responsibility Report, David Potts, emphasised *'we're making good progress on the issues that matter most to our customers'* namely *'food safety, supporting British farmers, looking after our colleagues and buying British products.'* In his *'Chairman's Statement'* in John Lewis Partnership's 2017-2018 Corporate Social Responsibility Report, Sir Charlie Mayfield, argued *'too often corporate responsibility is seen as little more than reputation management by businesses that are limited by a singular focus on shareholder return. For the John Lewis Partnership this could not be further from the truth.'* More specifically, the Chairman claimed *'as a business owned by its employees, we are governed by a Constitution that sets out our responsibilities to each other, to those we do business with, and to the wider community. This report details how we discharge those duties.'* The stories behind these messages look to emphasise the companies' strategic executive commitment to corporate social responsibility at all levels in their organisations and how such commitments touch the everyday lives of employees, customers and communities. .

Messages from employees at a range of levels within the selected retailers were also a common feature of the corporate social responsibility reporting process. Asda, in looking to evidence that *'community is the cornerstone of our business'*, posted messages from four of its *'Community Champions.'* Christine Baldwin, for example, from the company's store in Bolton, reported *'I really do love my job and I think that's because you are giving, not taking, from anyone. When you know you can suggest ideas on a project and see them come to life, you get so much from it.'* In a similar vein, Andrea McQuoid, who works for the company in Northern Ireland, said *'The Community Initiative is a big focus for Asda and we really live it, aiming to make the area around the Downpatrick store a better place to live and work for Asda colleagues and customers alike.'* Jon Hartland, Director of Non Food Operations at Sainsbury's emphasised the importance the company attached to *'delivering great impact in our communities'* with the following message. *'The work we do with our communities, with food donations, is absolutely critical. Our colleagues' commitment to local heroes, for example, is often eye-watering as is the effort they put into making their Charity of the Year such a success.'* Marks and Spencer looked to reinforce the reporting of the success of the company's *'Global Community Programme'* with a message from an *'Emerging Leaders Trainee in Kenya'* who said *'Before the training, I did not think that people like me can lead a successful life. Now I believe it is possible.'*

Lidl helped to illustrate *'our approach to animal welfare'*, with a message from Ryan McDonnell, the company's Commercial Director with the message *'Our pledge to work closely with our UK suppliers to phase out the sale of shell eggs from caged hens underlies our understanding of our consumers' changing expectations, as shoppers increasingly search for responsibly sourced, high quality British produce at the best price.'* In reporting on an initiative to help reduce food waste by giving some 15,000 customers fridge thermometers to check if their fridge was operating at the correct temperature, Sainsbury's cited a short message from Rebeka Muldowney, one of the company's fridge thermometer testers, which read *'it's such a simple idea but can make such a difference.'* In addressing its approach to its workforce, Morrisons included the following message from an employee who had followed the company graduate scheme. *'Morrisons graduate scheme has enabled me to experience roles which I had never before considered. I have been given lots of experience early on. All colleagues are very welcoming and have spent time developing me whether I have been in store or head office.'* All these stories look to emphasise the selected retailers' employees' commitments to, and support for, corporate social responsibility and how such commitments touch everyday lives of their employees and help to enrich their work experience.

In number of cases, the selected retailers used messages from individuals and organisations outside their company to reinforce their corporate social responsibility commitments. Morrisons, for example, looked to help emphasise its commitment to responsible sourcing with a message from Chloe North, the UK Fisheries Outreach Officer for the Marine Stewardship Council. The message read *'Project Fisheries Improvements is an ambitious project aiming to achieve an environmentally sustainable future for key commercial UK fisheries. This project would never have got off the ground without the support of Morrisons, along with other companies, coming together in a pre-competitive partnership.'* Ali Cooper, the Horticulture and Potatoes Board Chairperson at the National Farmers Union, endorsed Lidl's approach to *'Buying British'* with the message *'we are delighted that Lidl has committed to our pledge, highlighting its commitment to long term supply relationships, equitable distribution of reward along the supply chain, and fair and respectful trading relationships.'* The general story here is very much one of external endorsement of the selected retailers' approaches to corporate social responsibility.

Many of the selected UK food retailers used a variety of cameo case studies as part of their approach to storytelling within the corporate social responsibility process. Lidl, for example, helped to illustrate its approach to sustainable sourcing with a short case study of *'Fairtrade cocoa sourcing.'* Here the company reported that over 120 of its brands included cocoa and that most of it is grown on small farms by rural workers, who directly depend on it for their livelihoods. Lidl further reported that it was one of the first retailers to offer its customers a range of products under the Fairtrade Cocoa Programme, which looks to ensure that farmers earn a fair price for their cocoa and that they also receive the Fairtrade Premium to support democratically agreed local community programmes. John Lewis Partnership's Corporate Responsibility Report included a case study of Waitrose's approach to ocean stewardship. The case study outlined how Waitrose worked with its suppliers to improve its corporate social responsibility credentials and that *'through our purchasing power and expertise we aim to influence positive change in global sourcing practices and to reassure customers that the fish they buy has been sourced responsibly.'*

Marks and Spencer employed 13 case studies to help illustrate its *Global Community Programme*.⁷ One case study, outlined how Marks and Spencer had been a founding member of the Movement to Work programme in the UK, which is a coalition of employers who came together in an attempt to tackle youth unemployment. More specifically Marks and Spencer argued that *'this programme has proved to be an effective tool for suppliers, resulted in reduced recruitment and training costs, improvement in staff engagement and employing more local people.'* Another of these case studies was focused on *'Sustainable Water Stewardship with Stone Fruit Growers in South Africa.'* The case study outlined Marks and Spencer's work with stone fruit (for example, plums and peaches) farmers in the Breede River basin, to develop a water stewardship programme designed around efficiency in water use, water quality monitoring, on-site wetland management and staff training. This programme is customised at the farm level in that *'each farm has taken action in different ways to adjust farming practices that use water or affect water levels or quality.'*

The Cooperative employed a case study on *'improving packaging recyclability'* as part of its reporting on its approach to *'the environment and resource use.'* This case study outlined how The Cooperative had *'continued to lead cross industry work to improve packaging recyclability, including engagement with local authorities and government to improve the UK recycling system.'* The case study also outlined how the company had *'made several market leading innovations to increase the amount of plastics that can be recycled'* including *'new cooked meat packaging', 'new pizza packaging bases',* and had minimised the amount of black plastic in a number of product lines. Overall the company reported that *'71% of our co-op branded packaging is easy to recycle.'* The Cooperative also employed a case study to illustrate how the company was collaborating with suppliers to reduce their impacts. More specifically the case study outlined how The Cooperative *'had collaborated with suppliers to gather data on energy, water and waste'* and that its *'Farming Enviromap tool'* was *'helping us to understand the environmental hot spots in our supply chain.'*

Discussion

Increasingly storytelling is seen to be important in bringing social responsibility reporting to life. The findings reported above reveal that storytelling is certainly playing a part addressing a range of environmental, social and economic agendas and achievements in the corporate social responsibility material posted by the majority of the UK's leading food retailers. That said, three sets of issues merit reflection and discussion. Firstly, the stories cited above look to emphasise the leading UK food retailers' commitments to corporate social responsibility and many of them strike potentially powerful emotive chords. The tone of the stories is exclusively positive in describing and illustrating the selected retailers' corporate social responsibility strategies, and more particularly their specific policies, actions and achievements, in a favourable light. As such, the stories might be seen to reflect Leinaweaver's (2015) claim, that *'many corporate sustainability reports have perfectly scripted stories – stories told to create a party line.'* Within the social realm stories featuring employees, for example, paint a picture of a committed and caring employer, of the provision of a wide range of development opportunities within the workplace and of a happy and loyal workforce. In a similar vein, stories about the selected retailers' commitments to the communities in which they operate are very much within the

spirit of economic and social community development. A common thread running through stories with an environmental theme is a commitment to stewardship and to the conservation of natural resources.

However, the underlying message from the stories in the selected companies' corporate social responsibility reports and updates, stands in marked contrast to a number of rather different stories about the impact the retail industry is having on the environment, society and the economy. The Tescopoly Alliance (2018a), for example, which claims to be *'campaigning to curb supermarket power'* and which uses the slogan *'every little hurts'*, was founded in 2005 *'to highlight and challenge the negative impacts of Tesco's behaviour along its supply chains both in the UK and internationally, on small businesses, on workers, on communities and the environment.'* The Alliance claims to represent a diverse range of organisations and its members include Friends of the Earth, War on Want, the New Economics Foundation and the GMB trade union and campaigns on a number of issues including national and local planning policies, the supermarket code of practice introduced in 2002, workers' rights and blocking the takeover of existing retail chains by the four leading UK food retailers.

In addressing planning, for example, the Tescopoly Alliance (2018b) argued *'in the 1970s and 1980s, planning laws were relaxed, and allowed a large amount of out-of-town supermarket development. By the 1990s, it was clear that massive superstores relying on car-use and bulk buying were killing the High Street and were not socially or environmentally sustainable.'* In focusing on local plans the Tescopoly Alliance (2018b) suggested that *'local authorities should develop positive initiatives to encourage more sustainable forms of retail and protect independent shops. Islington's Local Plan, for example, encouraged initiatives such as co-operatives and street trading and providing support for small shops.'* The Tescopoly Alliance (2018b) also criticised *'the practice by the largest retail chains of holding on to a massive land bank of properties'* and *'the practice of retailers placing restrictive covenants on land to stop a competitor moving in'*, which the Alliance saw as *'a barrier for small chains entering the market.'*

Greenpeace (2018a), which looks *'to defend the natural worldby investigating, exposing and confronting environmental abuse'*, reported that *'in the UK, supermarkets produce almost 1 million tonnes of plastic each year'* and argued that supermarkets *'use loads of excess plastic packaging – so even if you want to reduce your own personal plastic footprint, the moment you do your daily food shop you are inundated with fruit and veg wrapped in plastic.'* Further Greenpeace (2018b) reported that on Earth Day (April 22) 2018 that *'volunteers took action to highlight supermarkets' plastic packaging problem'* by visiting a number of stores and replacing the plastic fruit and vegetable bags with paper ones and relabelling *'the shelves of overly-packaged fruit and veg to highlight the problem.'* In the past Friends of the Earth (2007) has also organised campaigns to highlight what the organisation saw as the negative impacts of supermarkets. Many of the concerns cited above are fiercely contested by the retail industry, but they present a very different image of the corporate retail world to that portrayed in the stories many of the leading UK food retailers' employ in their corporate social responsibility reports.

Secondly, there are there are issues surrounding the relationship between the 'particular' and the 'general', in that the stories employed as part of the corporate social responsibility reporting process, focus on specific individuals, events and initiatives, and as such can be seen to be specially chosen and choreographed by the selected retailers. These stories may well have a strong human interest, and many of them certainly have a strong emotive appeal, which may well resonate with audiences on corporate websites and social media. However, they cannot necessarily be seen to be necessarily representative of the UK food retailers' corporate social responsibility agendas and achievements. Indeed, more cynically, the UK's leading food retailers might be seen to be taking the view that such stories may play a valuable role in directing attention away from concerns often expressed in both the mainstream media, in in pressure group publications and on their websites, and on social media, about the environmental, social and economic impact of their business activities. That is not, of course, to call into question the voracity and/or the integrity of the stories themselves, but rather to suggest that the UK's leading food retailers need to more fully address the extent to which the stories they employ are indeed a true representation of their corporate social responsibility commitments and achievements.

Here, concerns can be identified at a corporate, an ethical and an academic level. At the corporate level the issues of materiality and assurance are important. Materiality is concerned with how corporate social responsibility issues deemed to be most important to the company, and crucially to all its stakeholders, are determined, while assurance is concerned with how the companies provide independent external verification of the information contained in their published corporate social responsibility reports and updates. A number of the selected retailers, including The Cooperative, John Lewis Partnership and Lidl did provide information on how stakeholder engagement contributed to the identification and prioritisation of the corporate social responsibility challenges perceived to be facing the company, but this practice was no universal amongst the selected retailers. As such, the stories used to illustrate a number of the corporate social responsibility issues identified by the selected retailers might be seen to reflect strategic corporate thinking rather than wider stakeholder concerns. A number of the selected retailers included independent assurance statements, as part of their reporting process though these statements were often limited to a small number of issues rather than to the full spectrum of corporate social responsibility achievements. At the same time, not all of UK's leading food retailers reported on commissioning assurance exercises. Here again, while specific stories were used to illustrate many of the environmental, social and economic issues in the selected retailers' corporate social responsibility reports and updates, their more general applicability might be seen to be called into question by the lack of independent external assurance.

Ethical concerns might be seen to arise when employees and suppliers are approached to publicly endorse a specific element of a retailer's corporate social responsibility strategy or achievements. Such approaches could put potential respondents in a difficult position in that a rank and file employee might feel that a refusal to provide a positive endorsement could prejudice her/his current employment position or future career progression and a supplier might be concerned that a refusal could jeopardise future supply contracts. While many retailers might be reluctant to countenance such concerns, media reports have suggested that attempts to encourage suppliers to publicly disclose details of

concerns about their relationships with the large food retailers are generally met with a wall of silence (e.g. The Guardian 2015). At an academic level, Maagard (2014) explored the role of messages from BP and Walmart employees as a strategy in corporate image management. In addressing the authenticity of such messages, Maagard (2014) argued that *'employees must be seen to mean what they say, and not merely be a mouthpiece for the management'* and concluded that employees messages *'put into relief not only the difficult balance between authenticity and promotional force in corporate communication, but also the entanglement of participant roles, in organizations' co-construction of employee stories to serve strategic purposes.'*

Thirdly, and more generally, in many ways the selected retailers' corporate social responsibility reporting process reviewed in this paper, is by and large, traditional and conservative in style in that there is, at best, only limited attempts to harness rapidly evolving developments in information and communication technologies in the reporting process. Amesheva (2017), for example, suggested that technological innovations that *'enable real-time data collection and reporting, new methods of communication and number-crunching is set to transform the world of corporate social responsibility.'* In a similar vein Morin and Muruganathan (2017) argued that new developments in information and communication technologies offer *'creative ways to share sustainability stories'* and to create *'real human stories for a wide audience.'* More specifically, Morin and Muruganathan (2017) suggested that companies can now *'liberate the content in their sustainability reports'*, for example, by improved accessibility, the development of engaging content, digital videos and documentaries and data visualisation tools. Recognising that *'corporate social responsibility today is a major drive for a company's public image and the strength of their respective brands'*, Wille et al. (2014) developed a computer aided model for interactive corporate social responsibility campaigns using storytelling.

However, how far many large retailers will choose to go in embracing such innovations and in effectively providing wholesale and transparent public access to corporate social responsibility information and stories remains very much to be seen. That said, such innovations will surely provide exciting new vehicles for storytelling within the corporate social responsibility reporting process. As such, innovatively presented stories may find a receptive audience amongst many stakeholders who are increasingly conscious of, and open to, sophisticated methods of communication and reporting. Such an approach may allow companies to illustrate their corporate social responsibility achievements with seemingly compelling stories that can seem so seductive and vivid that they effectively mask the bigger, and possibly less appealing picture.

Conclusions

Storytelling has grown in importance within the world of business and it is now commonly employed, for example, in public relations, communications management and marketing. More specifically stories are increasingly used as an integral element in corporate social responsibility reporting. This paper reviews the ways stories have been used in the corporate social responsibility reporting process by some the UK's leading food retailers and identifies a number of storytelling formats, namely, photographs and images, video clips, personal messages and cameo case studies. While such stories often have a

powerful human appeal and can strike emotive chords, the authors would argue that stories can, in part, be potentially misleading in that they do not necessarily fully reflect a company's corporate social responsibility record. More contentiously, positive stories with a potentially powerful emotive human appeal might be seen to mask a more accurate record of a company's corporate social responsibility achievements. That said, Sutton's (2017) argument, that there is no role for storytelling in corporate social responsibility reports, might be considered extreme and seems unlikely to find favour amongst the leading players within the retail industry. More positively, it is important that a range of stakeholders including investors, employees, consumers, the media, governments and pressures groups, as well as academic commentators, look to rigorously review the corporate social responsibility reporting process. The authors recognise that this exploratory paper has a number of limitations, as outlined earlier, but they believe it provides an initial commentary on storytelling in the corporate social responsibility process within UK food retailing, and that, as such, it provides a platform for future research. Looking to the future, academic research might profitably look, for example, to include studies of how other retailers and companies from other sectors of the economy, not only in the UK but also elsewhere in the world employ storytelling within their corporate social responsibility reporting process, of how such stories are identified and developed within companies, and of if, and how, customers' perceptions of, and responses to, such stories influences buying behaviour.

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