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Stories and Retailer Brands: A Study of the UK's Leading Retailers

Peter Jones and Daphne Comfort

Abstract

Storytelling, in one form or another, is probably as old as the human race, but in recent years, the importance of stories has become increasingly important within the business community, not least in public relations, leadership, marketing and branding. Within the retail sector of the economy the emergence of the retailer as a brand has been recognised as a major trend, but the role of stories in contributing to retailer brands has received less attention in the academic literature. This exploratory paper illustrates if, and how, storytelling has been employed by the leading UK retailers on their corporate websites and offers some reflections on storytelling in contributing to retailer brands. The findings reveal that the majority of the leading UK retailers employ a variety of stories on their corporate websites but the authors suggest that despite this variety, these stories, were all choreographed by the retailers to contribute to their corporate brands. At the same time, the authors suggest that many of the stories fail to clearly differentiate clearly one retailer from another and they also outline some of the problems involved in employing storytelling in contributing to retailer brands.

Keywords Stories, Storytelling, Retailer Brands, Marketing, Brands, Differentiation, UK

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Introduction

Storytelling, in one form or another, is probably as old as the human race, and businesses have increasingly come to recognise the importance of stories, for example, in public relations, leadership, organizational learning, marketing and branding. Singh and Sonnenburg (2012), for example, suggested *'the branding literature has long recognized the power of storytelling to provide meaning to the brand and practitioners have used storytelling to enhance consumers' connections with brands.'* Herskovitz and Crystal (2010) argued that *'in communicating their brands, businesses need to tell a compelling story that connects with its audiences on an emotional level.'* In a similar vein, I-Scoop (2018) claimed that *'storytelling is one of the most powerful ways to breathe life into your brand.'* Branding is used to distinguish/differentiate an organisation or product from its competitors in the eyes of the customer and Marketing Mo (2018) argued *'brands make an emotional connection with the market'* and that *'in today's digital world that can be more complicated than ever.'*

Within the retail sector of the economy, Burt and Davies (2010) traced *'the evolution of branding in retailing from studies of store brands to the exploration of the retailer as a brand'* and Gilani (2011) argued that *'the rise of the retailer as a brand is one of the most important trends in retailing.'* Essentially a retailers' brand represents its market identity—who they are, what they do, what kind of quality they provide, their reputation for trustworthiness. While research has been undertaken on how stories can illuminate brands

(e.g. Mucundorfeanue-2018; Herskovitz and Crystal 2010), the role of storytelling in contributing to retailer brands has received little attention in the academic literature. With these thoughts in mind, this commentary paper outlines of the nature of storytelling and its role in retailing, provides some illustrations of the ways in which some of the UK's leading retailers have employed stories on their websites and offers some reflections on the use of storytelling in promoting retailer brands.

Storytelling and 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 word of mouth communication and drawings, though over time the written, and then the printed, word became an increasingly important storytelling medium. Osman (2014, webpage) 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.'* More recently, developments in information and communication technologies, particularly social media, have seen storytelling become an increasingly all pervasive and all-embracing experience.

Stories are embedded in people's everyday lives, and in recent years, there has been increasing recognition of the role of storytelling in the business world. 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 a new point-of-view or reinforce an opinion or behaviour.'* PricewaterhouseCoopers (2017) 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.'*

Storytelling has been employed in many areas of marketing, including fashion marketing (e.g. Glover 2017), tourism (e.g. Pera 2017), hospitality (e. g. Solnet et al. 2100) and energy efficiency social marketing consumption (e. g. Gordon et al.2018) and in creating relationships with brands (e.g. Fog et al. 2005). Within retailing, there has been some interest in storytelling in the sales encounter and at the store level. Gilliam and Zablah (2013), for example, 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, while Gilliam and Flaherty (2015) explored the role that storytelling plays in the exchange between salesperson and customer.

VisualRetailing (2018) argued *'today's consumer no longer simply wants to buy – they're looking for a rewarding shopping experience, made of emotions – of stories. Stories make you feel things. They help convey information and help people retain information better.'* Pamela Danzinger (2017), the founder of Unity Marketing, argued *'retailers are discovering the way to move from a product-centric to a consumer-centric retail model is through storytelling'* and that *'today retailers must focus on customers and the stories they want to hear.'* In a similar vein Lisa Mukhedkar (2017), the co-founder of Restore, a retail design firm based in Bangalore, claimed *'retail storytelling is one of the most critical factors*

in creating a great experience for the customer. Stories that form an emotional connect with the customer are remembered for a long time.'

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.'* In looking to highlight the increasing importance of storytelling Danzinger (2017) suggested *'Timberland is doing it with its TreeLab concept where every 6-to-8 weeks the TreeLab store is made over to tell a new story with a curated selection of Timberland products elements in that story'* and that *'perhaps the most story-intensive retailer is NYC's STORY Store, on 10th Avenue in the Chelsea district'* (of New York) where *'every 4-to-8 weeks the store reboots to bring in a whole new range of merchandise to tell a new story.'*

More generally, storytelling is seen to be potentially important in that it enables retailers to forge strong bonds with their customers and for customers to feel connected to the retailer brand. As such, storytelling is seen to be vitally important in conveying what the retailer brand stands for, and the provenance of that brand and its goods and services. Insider Trends (2018), *'the trend based consultancy that helps global brands create world leading and profitable retail ecosystems'*, and whose clients include Tesco, Marks and Spencer, Carrefour, Walmart and Ikea, argued that *'storytelling is a great way of conveying what your brand is all about'* and *'for retailers to focus on forging strong bonds with their customers.'* At the same time, Bulbeck (2017, webpage) suggested that *'in this increasingly customer-driven era, storytelling has become an integral part of connecting with customers'*, while Wheeler (2017) argued that *'it is no exaggeration to say that customer engagement, the vital pull factor that keeps customers coming back for more, is what can make or break a retailer.'*

Frame of Reference and Method of Enquiry

The retail industry is a vital element in the UK economy and in 2017 it generated some £406 billion of sales (House of Commons Library 2018) and it is the country's largest private sector employer. There are some 290,000 retail outlets within the UK, but there is marked concentration within the market with estimates suggesting that *'large firms account for around 40 per cent of employment and 53 per cent of turnover'* (House of Commons Committee on Exiting the European Union 2017). Mesic (2015), for example, suggested that the ten leading retailers account for almost 40% of all retail sales. In an attempt to explore the ways in which the leading UK retailers employ storytelling in their retailer marketing, the top ten UK retailers, as measured by 2017-2018 sales (Retail Economics 2018) namely Tesco, J. Sainsburys, Asda, Morrisons, Kingfisher, John Lewis., Aldi, Marks and Spencer, the Co-operative, Amazon and Boots, were selected for study (Table 1).

The four largest UK based retailers, Tesco, Sainsbury's Asda and Morrisons, are often referred to as food retailers, though in part this is a misnomer in that while they were all initially established as grocery retailers, they now all sell a wider range of consumer goods. Tesco 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 initially founded in 1869, trades from over 600

supermarkets, some 800 convenience stores and the 800 stores operating under the banner of Argos (a catalogue retailer acquired by Sainsbury's in 2016), throughout the UK. Asda (at the time of writing, part of Walmart, the world's largest retailer) was founded in Yorkshire in 1965 and though originally based in the north of England, the company began to expand its retail operations into the South of England during the 1970s and 1980s and it currently trades from over 600 locations within the UK. Morrisons, founded in 1899 in Bradford, Yorkshire, trades from some 500 stores. The company's operations were concentrated in the Midlands and North of England up to 2004 but since then it has developed a growing presence in the South of England.

The John Lewis Partnership operates a chain of over 30 John Lewis department stores and some 600 Waitrose food supermarkets. Aldi is a German discount supermarket, which opened its first store in the UK in 1990 and it now operates from 775 stores throughout the UK. Marks and Spencer, arguably the UK's most iconic retailer, specialises in the sale of clothing, household goods and food and trades from almost 1,000 stores within the UK, including over 600 that sell only food products. The Cooperative is a consumer cooperative with a diverse range of retail operations, principally food retailing, but which also includes electrical retailing, travel agencies and funeral services. Amazon is the world's largest e-commerce marketplace and it has separate retail websites in a number of countries including the UK. Boots, a subsidiary of the US based Walgreen Boots Alliance, is a health and beauty retailer and operates from over 2,000 large stores and smaller pharmacies throughout the UK.

As the largest UK retailers, the selected companies might be seen to reflect cutting edge and innovative approaches to stories and storytelling. With this in mind the authors conducted an Internet search for information, using the key phrases 'stories' and 'storytelling' and the name of each of the selected retailers. This search was conducted in January 2018, using Google as the search engine and the results of these searches provided the empirical material for this paper. The specific examples and selected quotations drawn from the storytelling elements are used for illustrative purposes, with the principal aim being on reviewing how the selected retailers employed stories and storytelling on their corporate websites, and not on providing a comparative evaluation of the storytelling process. The paper is based on information that was posted on the Internet, and thus in the public domain, and the authors took the view that they did not need to contact the selected retailers to obtain formal permission prior to conducting their research. At the same time the authors recognise that their study has its limitations, not least that it is based on authors' selection and interpretation of the storytelling elements on the corporate websites. That said the authors believe that their approach is appropriate in what is an exploratory study.

Findings

The internet search revealed that eight of the selected ten retailers, namely, Tesco, Sainsbury's, Asda, John Lewis Partnership, Aldi, Marks and Spencer, Co-operative and Boots employed what they described as 'stories', to on their corporate websites to promote their retailer brands. That said, there were marked variations both in the approach to storytelling as well in the content and focus of the stories. Thus, while a number of stories outlined the

retailer's history and culture, others that were told from, for example, from customers' or employees' perspectives or which focused upon a product or product range, or stores also had a strong corporate stamp.

In *'Our founder: the John Spedan Lewis story'*, for example, John Lewis Partnership, outlined how *'with an ambitious vision of co-ownership, and of how a business could put the happiness of its employees at the heart of everything it did, and profit by it, John Spedan Lewis left a radical mark on commercial history'* and claimed that *'the John Spedan Lewis way is as alive today as it was 90 years ago'* (John Lewis Partnership undated). The story included an audio transcript of a radio broadcast on the BBC by John Spedan Lewis recorded in 1957. This broadcast clearly described the founder's underlying philosophy and the economic and social benefits which he believed would accrue from this philosophy. Under the banner *'Our Story'* Morrisons reported *'we've grown from a market stall in Bradford to one of the UK's leading supermarkets. Proud of our roots, we've got a great story to tell and can look forward to a fantastic future'* (Morrisons 2018).

'In telling 'Our Story', Asda reported that 'founded in the 1960s in Yorkshire, Asda is one of Britain's leading retailers. Dedicated colleagues serve customers from our network of stores and online services, including supercentres, superstores, supermarkets, petrol filling stations and depots across the UK. More than 18 million people shop with Asda every week.' (Asda 2018). Further Asda reported *'the story of Asda is full of amazing, surprising facts and it starts in Yorkshire with the Asquith and Stockdale families almost 100 years ago. This is the story of how these two families created one incredible retail revolution'* (Asda 2018). Further Asda claimed *"from our beginnings as the first UK discounter, offering our customers the very best value has been our driving force. We built our business upon listening to our diverse range of customers and offering what they need. We're at our best when we keep things simple'* (Asda 2018).

Under the headline *'Our Sustainability Story'* Marks and Spencer, provided details of its *'Plan A'*, which is *'our way to help build a sustainable future by being a business that enables our customers to have a positive impact on wellbeing, communities and the planet through all that we do'* (Marks and Spencer 2017). More specifically Marks and Spencer claimed *'we've already helped to redefine the role of business in society'* and reported *'having started our Plan A journey ten years ago'* (Marks and Spencer 2017). Since then the company claimed to *'have substantially improved our social and environmental performance, whilst also saving more than £750 million in costs and winning more than 240 awards'* (Marks and Spencer 2017). Further, Marks and Spencer argued *'We've done this by setting bold goals and integrating Plan A deep into our business processes, whilst simultaneously ensuring strong governance and independent assurance. We've built partnerships with communities, councils, charities, NGOs and businesses (including our competitors) to collectively solve problems and scale-up solutions'* (Marks and Spencer 2017).

Aldi posted a number of *'Corporate Responsibility Stories'* subtitled *'Our Everyday Amazing Stories'*, which embraced a range of topics including the environment, healthy eating, the supply chain, and the community (Aldi 2019). In *'Know your label: improving the health of a nation'*, the story argued *'Now it's easier to make healthier food choices'* and suggested *'as*

part of our healthy eating agenda, we want to make sure you can find out exactly what's in the food you are eating by simply looking at the nutritional labelling. And with the help of nutritionists, behaviour experts and shoppers, we're working hard to make sure more information is displayed in a clear and simple manner' (Aldi 2019). More specifically the story provided advice and guidance on the labelling of products to show fat, sugar, salt, saturates and calories contents and portion sizes. The environment stories focused on waste management and animal rights.

Some of the selected retailers posted customer stories. Tesco's 'Food Love Stories', for example, were a series of its customers' special recipes, with the strapline *'behind every meal we love is a story. It's more than just a bunch of ingredients'* (Tesco 2019). A variety of customers' favourite recipes were highlighted including *'Marc's Winning Sweet Potato Fritters'*, *'Nana's Magic Soup'*, *'Ella's One Handed Stir Fry'*, *'Stu's Never Fails Mac 'N Cheese'*, *'Bill and Izzy's Mum'll Love This Cake'* and *'Alice's Peace Making Cup Cakes'* (Tesco 2019). The first of these stories told of how *'watching football while eating chips was always a big deal for Marc and his dad. But Dad has to try and be healthier now, so Marc makes his spicy baked fritters instead – proper sharing food they can tuck into while cheering on team'* (Tesco 2019). The story of *'Alice's Peace Making Cup Cakes'* revealed *'Honestly, Alice from our story didn't mean to say it-somehow it just came out in the heat of the moment, during a row with her stepmum. She instantly regretted it but couldn't find quite the right words to apologise. So instead she used a different kind of language – the powerful language of cupcakes – to say sorry. To her huge relief, it works'* (Tesco 2019). Each of the Food Love Stories includes the recipe and the ingredients.

A number of the selected retailers posted employees stories. Under the banner *'Colleague Stories'*, employees of the Co-operative, posted a number of messages (Co-op 2019). Andy Phelps, for example, posted a story headlined *'Lets Thank our suppliers for contributing to creating a stronger Co-op'* (Co-op 2019). This story argued *'It's been an incredible year for Co-op Food as we've enjoyed the enviable status of becoming the UK's fastest growing convenience retailer'* (Co-op 2019). Looking to the future Andy Phelps further argued *'we operate in a tough retail market and to win in this market and to win with customers, we'll need to work more closely with suppliers than ever before. It means taking advantage of opportunities but also combining our retail experience to find solutions to challenges and to minimise business risks'* (Co-op 2019). At the same time while Andy Phelps also reported *'However, it's also been a year when the Groceries Code Adjudicator launched an investigation into our treatment of suppliers in the areas of delisting and introducing charges'* (Co-op 2019). Nevertheless, he suggested *'We've done a lot of work to fix this and there's plenty more to do but it's still right to reflect on the past 12 months and the positive role our suppliers have played in creating a stronger Co-op, helping us to support communities and giving millions of pounds back through our community fund'* (Co-op 2019).

In the story entitled *'The Good, The Bap and the Downright Delicious'*, posted as part of *'British Sandwich Week'*, members of Marks and Spencer's Recruitment Team identified their *'Favourites'* (Marks and Spencer 2019). Thus, for Steph *'It's got to be Coronation Chicken. Mainly because it has onion seeds in the bread. It adds a lovely flavour'*, while Tom chose *'Egg Mayonnaise. You can have it morning, noon or night. Rain, wind or shine. It's the*

sandwich that keeps giving from first to last bite’ and Helena revealed ‘It’s the humble ham and cheese for me’ (Marks and Spencer 2019). In another of Marks and Spencer’s ‘Employee Stories’, Zofia, one of the company’s Food and Drink Public Relations Assistant’s told her story as part of the celebration of ‘Deaf Awareness Week’ (Marks and Spencer 2019). She recounted how ‘as part of my university degree, I chose to do a 12-month industry placement. I applied to several places but was so thrilled when I was accepted at M&S as a Food Press Assistant. It’s a busy role that sees me regularly liaise with journalists and organise events like press shows. It’s a buzzy environment and I love the fact I’ve been given so much responsibility’ (Marks and Spencer 2019). Zofia concluded her story by saying ‘If I could give anyone advice with hearing loss I’d say be positive and don’t let anyone tell you that you can’t do it because you are deaf, because you can! Carry on, even if it’s a long ride, never give up’ (Marks and Spencer 2019).

A number of stories about ‘Our Colleagues’ were posted on Sainsbury corporate website (Sainsbury’s 2019).. Under the headline ‘Sainsbury’s Celebrates Black History Month’ the story told how ‘As Black History Month draws to a close, Sainsbury’s and Argos colleagues across the UK have had a fantastic time celebrating this special month of observance together’ (Sainsbury’s 2019). Another story entitled ‘Empowering our colleagues’ told of how ‘Having a diverse range of colleagues is part of our fabric, we aim to be the most inclusive retailer where all our colleagues can fulfill their potential’ and included an image of Irvinder and Sarah, who featured in the ‘Financial Times EMpower Top 100 Ethnic Minority Leaders List’ (Sainsbury’s 2019). More specifically this story claimed ‘Our Embrace the Difference initiative, launched last year, inspired a huge number of colleagues to share their stories and be open and honest with one another about what makes them different. By bravely sharing their stories and acting as role models and mentors for many colleagues, both Irvinder and Sarah have been key in driving Sainsbury’s inclusion agenda. Their involvement in our Race Reference Group has resulted in a number of initiatives aimed at helping our BAME colleagues be the best they can be’ (Sainsbury’s 2019).

Boots’ ‘Colleague Stories’ included details of a story entitled ‘The Next Generation of Tech Leaders Attend Retail Week Tech Conference’ (Boots 2019). Some 20 employees from Boots attended a ‘two day festival of digital retailing and the technology driving it’ and the focus was on ‘putting the most disruptive thinkers under the spotlight - from the companies that are revolutionising their industries, to the tech firms creating the most innovative of products’ (Boots 2019). More specifically, ‘teams competed over a 24 hour period to find a solution/solutions to the question: How can retail reduce its carbon footprint through technology?’ Stephen Boothroyd, Senior Enterprise Architect – Strategy and Architecture for Boots, a member of the judging panel for this competition, commented ‘All retailers understand the importance of digital transformation and the impact that it is already having on the sector. What’s exciting is how we now embrace new technological developments to make experiences for our customers and colleagues better, both in stores and online’ (Boots 2019). Other ‘Colleague Stories’ from Boots included details of one of its pharmacist receiving ‘The British Citizen Award’ and of having a ‘Dementia Friend’ in every one of the company’s stores in Wales (Boots 2019).

Boots also posted stories that illustrated how *'dedicated colleagues, customers and patients'* had worked together in *'fundraising festivities'* to raise £1 million in 2018 for the BBC's 'Children in Need' charitable appeal. (Boots 2019). Seb James, Senior Vice President and Managing Director of Boots, said *'After 15 special years, our partnership with BBC Children in Need is stronger than ever. I am delighted that Boots is working with a charity that makes such an extraordinary difference to so many children right across the UK. This year, once again, our colleagues and customers have made it their mission to get involved, to go better than ever before, and to raise as much money as they possibly can. My sincere thanks to all of them for making 2018 another fantastic fundraising year'* (Boots 2019).

Some of the selected retailers posted stories about products and product ranges. John Lewis and Partnership, for example, posted a small number of *'Home Design Stories'*, which were used to *'bring you new style trends curated by our in-house design team, together with refreshed looks and updated products from our Home brands and interior design styles'* (John Lewis Partnership 2018). These stories included *'Fusion'* which was described as *'a globally influenced style that inspires the senses with its rich tapestry of colour, pattern and texture'* and the *'Croft Collection'*, which offered *'a relaxed feel you'll love to come home to forever'* (John Lewis Partnership 2019). In describing the *'Palazzo Collection'*, a *'lavish new selection of products that are the maximalist's answer to cool, pared-back Scandi style'*, Fionnuala Johnston, a Senior Designer at John Lewis Partnership, suggested that while *'this collection won't fit seamlessly into a minimalist home: each piece channels individual influences from the 20th century that complement current trends, updating traditional designs for modern tastes'* (John Lewis Partnership 2018). Under the story headline *'Leagues ahead on sustainable fish'*, Sainsbury's announced *'We're top of the Marine Stewardship Council (MSC) league table on sustainable fish – with over 200MSC certified products, more than twice as many as any other British supermarket'* (Sainsbury's 2019).

Some of the selected retailers' stories featured their stores. Boots', for example, featured stories about new stores at Thorpe Park in Leeds and at the Epping Forest Shopping Park in Essex and a new pharmacy in Hamilton, Scotland. The store at Thorpe Park is part of a new retail and leisure development and is designed to *'meet the health and beauty needs of the local community, providing customers with a wide range of pharmacy services, new brands and health and beauty products'* (Boots 2019). Store manager Sam Cale-Brister commented *'We're really excited to bring a new health and beauty Boots store to the local community as part of the brand new Thorpe Park Leeds development. We know that our customers in East Leeds are really looking forward to being able to shop from all of their favourite brands at Boots, and we can't wait to welcome them into the beautiful new unit. We're also thrilled to have 15 new Boots colleagues joining the team, including a brand new Premium Beauty team of eight, who will be on hand to help our customers with all of their health and beauty needs'* (Boots 2019). The story of the new pharmacy in Hamilton described how *'Along with a brand new dispensary, private consultation room and modern waiting area, the team of dedicated pharmacists and pharmacy support colleagues will be on hand to dispense patients' prescriptions, as well as offer valuable healthcare advice and information on over the counter medicines, right in the heart of the Hillhouse community'* (Boots 2019).

Stories about the communities in which the selected retailers operate also feature on some of their websites. Sainsbury's, for example, posted a number of stories about its *'community impact.'* The story entitled *'Sainsbury's and Argos support Purple Thursday'* told of the retailers' participation in the *'the UK's first ever accessible shopping day'*, which also helped to *'raise awareness and understanding of the challenges our customers with disabilities may face'* (Sainsbury's 2019). Other Sainsbury's *'community impact'* stories told of the development of food donation partnerships with over 2,000 local charities, of the company's commitment to raising literacy levels among school children and the donation of over £45 million to charities and good causes during 2016-2017 (Sainsbury's 2019). This last story featured John Hartland, Sainsbury's Non-Food Operation Director, in a 4-minute video clip in which he outlined how the company looks to make a *'positive difference in our community value'* (Sainsbury's 2019). In a similar vein Boots posted stories about how its partnership with Macmillan Cancer Support was *'working to improve care for those affected by cancer, together we have been making services offering cancer information and support available from an accessible and trusted high street location'* (Boots 2019).

Concluding Reflections

The findings reveal that the majority of leading UK retailers have employed a range of stories on their corporate web sites to contribute to their branding. While these stories only provide a snapshot at a particular moment in time, a number of concluding reflections merit attention. Firstly, while there are variations in the retailers' approach to storytelling and in the topics, which feature in the stories, the principal focus is clearly on retailer branding. On the one hand, for example, stories of the origins and history of the retailers serve to emphasise their founding philosophies and their success in building relationships, rooted in trust and confidence, with generations of customers. On the other hand, a number of the stories about employees, focused, for example, upon inclusion and staff development opportunities, look to cast the retailers in a progressive light. At the same time, a number of the stories illustrated above look to promote retailers' product ranges and to demonstrate how the retailers are responding to the needs of their customers. While many of the stories have a strong emotive appeal, they have a clear corporate stamp, and they were designed to enhance the retailer brand and were choreographed to that end by the retailers.

Secondly, there is the issue of differentiation in that branding is widely seen to offer important opportunities for retailers to differentiate themselves from their competitors and to enable consumers to know what to expect from the retailer. However, while the details of the stories posted by the UK leading retailers vary, as illustrated earlier in this paper, in many cases the underlying messages are very similar. A number of the retailers' stories, for example, recounted how employees were involved in raising money for charities and in working in the communities in which the retailers operated. In a similar vein, the stories of the corporate history of Asda and Morrisons had common themes and both stress their longstanding commitment to their customers, while opportunities for employee development are the focus of a number of retailers' stories. While Marks and Spencer are determined to play a leading role in building a sustainable future, as told in *'Our Sustainability Story'*, outlined earlier, many of the other selected retailers also have sustainability strategies. These strategies generally focus on the same sets of issues,

including climate change, water and waste management, sourcing with integrity, the circular economy, human wellbeing and human rights, as those addressed in Marks and Spencer's 'Sustainability Story.' The underlying similarities between many, but not all, of the retailers' stories would seem, in part at least, to undermine the role of storytelling in contributing to retailer brands.

Thirdly, and more generally, a number of commentators have raised concerns about the increasing use of stories in contributing to branding and about whether many of the types of stories employed by the leading UK retailers are stories at all. Olanski (2018), for example, raised concerns about authenticity and rather contentiously suggested that brands may be *'faking it by telling stories about how much the brand cares about poverty, human rights, a clean environment and other issues without actually making a difference.'* More generally, Naidu (2013) argued *'in business, all your stories must be authentically true'* and emphasised *'it's simply not worth the backlash and the damage that can have on your credibility. All it succeeds in doing is giving you a reputation for manufacturing, spinning and inventing stories.'*

More specifically, some of the retailers stores described in this paper illustrate some of the challenges of authenticity. While Tesco's 'Love Food Stories' describe the favourite recipes of a number of seemingly named individuals, there is no information on the true identity of these individuals. At the same time, Creative Brief (2018), the London based marketing consultancy, reported working with Tesco on the development of its Food Love Stories campaign. Here the focus was on promoting an understanding of *'the true value of food and its power to foster relationships and make memories'* and finding *'a distinctive way of communicating food quality in a crowded space, starting with Tesco colleagues and customers.'* Where retailers employ colleagues' stories, ethical concerns may be seen to arise in that colleagues might feel that a refusal to contribute positively to a request to publicly contribute to corporate storytelling could prejudice his/her current employment or future career prospects. While a number of retailers claim to be making important contributions to the transition to a sustainable future, as illustrated in 'Our Sustainability Story' posted by Marks and Spencer, research by Jones, Comfort and Hillier (2016) revealed that few of these claims are subject to independent external assurance.

Gearin (2018, for example, suggested that *'storytelling has become a loaded term'* but that when corporate writers *'engage in storytelling it suggests they are operating at a higher level, following in the grand traditions of Homer, Rowling and Spielberg.'* Further Gearin (2018) argued *'unfortunately when brands think about telling stories, they feel they need to talk about themselves – how we began, what we make, why we do what we do, the story behind the people behind the brand... Yes, these stories can be nicely told and lovingly produced, but they often make the brand look self-obsessed. Worse than that, they're often incredibly boring.'* Gearin (2018) concluded that *'it would be great if more corporate storytelling came from a place where businesses were more interesting, useful, relevant, entertaining or just plain helpful.'*

In a similar vein, and under the banner *'The Myth of Storytelling in Marketing and why brands should encourage story sharing'*, Hammond (2017) argued *'the myth in*

question..... is that not only is the term story overused in the world of communication , it is also widely misused.’ Hammond (2017) argues that in the ‘classical oral storytelling tradition’ stores ‘were never set in stone but forever changing as they were told, influenced by audience reaction and then re-told.’ Here Hammond (2017) suggested that the digital environments not only offers ‘accelerated interactivity’ but ‘still echoes the ancient tradition of storytelling by mirroring the importance of the audience in the process. In both instances and across centuries, the audience and consumers are there to listen, to develop and to share.’ Looking to the future, one of the major challenge for retailers will be to harness social media to develop an increasingly sophisticated and interactive approach to storytelling to contribute to their corporate brands

TABLE 1: TOP TEN UK RETAILERS	
RETAILER	SALES 2017-2018 (£ Billion)
TESCO	£38.7
SAINSBURY's	£27.9
ASDA	£22.2
MORRISON'S	£17.3
JOHN LEWIS PARTNERSHIP	£10.2
ALDI	£10.0
MARKS AND SPENCER	£9.6
COOPERATIVE GROUP	£9.5
AMAZON	£8.8
BOOTS	£6.8
Source: Retail Economics 2018	

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