

Sustainability as guiding principle of communicative action the transformative and transformational potential of corporate sustainability communication as niche construction, a case from the energy sector

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Franziska Weder

*Department of Business Communication,
Vienna University of Economics and Business, Vienna, Austria*

Abstract

Purpose – This paper expands on existing analyses of corporate energy and sustainability communication and shows the potential of evolutionary theory to study and conceptualize sustainable corporate communication as niche construction and its transformative and transformational potential.

Design/methodology/approach – With a qualitative content analysis of non-financial reporting of energy corporations and a deep dive into one selected case (Yin, 2013) with a two-step categorization of the sustainability related text and ($n = 5$) expert interviews (QCAmap, Mayring, 2019; Fenzl and Mayring, 2017), the paper reflects on alterations within the organization and in the organization–stakeholder relationships through corporate sustainability communication.

Findings – The analytical deep dive into one case of corporate sustainability communication of a multinational energy corporation shows the difference between a transformative and transformational character of corporate communication. The insights from the interviews support the assumption that corporates not only adapt to changes of environmental factors (perturbative communication) but also – however rarely – alter their spatiotemporal relationships with their external environment (relocational communication), so there is a lack of actual transformational communication.

Originality/value – Corporates in the (renewable) energy sector as well as industry networks like gas (infrastructure) suppliers have the potential to impact their environment (stakeholder, energy communities, etc.), change cultural patterns and norms and co-construct new socio-ecological niches through communication. The study presented gives evidence and examples for transformative corporate sustainability communication. On a conceptual level, it offers an innovative framework to understand sustainability as a guiding principle for corporate communication that will stimulate corporate communication research in the future.

Keywords Sustainability, Niche construction, Corporate sustainability communication, Strategic communication, Transformational communication

Paper type Conceptual paper



Introduction/purpose

In this article, we expand on the innovative theoretical framework of strategic communication as niche construction recently published by [Weder \(2023a\)](#) to explain and explore *corporate sustainability communication* and to develop a framework for *sustainable corporate communication*. The gap identified in this earlier paper will be filled by giving an answer to how potential for impact, reliability and bindingness is communicatively created in and through the organization–environment relationship and across various actors and, thus, how corporate communication can be *transformative and transformational*.

With the application of niche theory to strategic communication, [Weder \(2023a\)](#) focuses on narratives and frames as organizing principles of strategic communication and communicative cultivation processes. With an evolutionary perspective as heuristic, the emergence and increased diversity of issue-specific sustainability frames over time can be interpreted in a way that they “organize”, manifest and “institutionalize” the dominant sustainability narratives in the society. The changes in framing of sustainability related issues over time are part of an *adaption* process to a changing environment. Furthermore, beyond adaption processes, organizations and their storytelling related to a specific issue, here: sustainability, have an *impact on* the organizational environment. Thus, the sustainability story seems to be a strategic story that corporates select to create their own communicative niche, to create new opportunities and potential for action. The question remains: When and under which conditions is the impact actually “sustainable”? One possible assumption to be followed in the paper at hand is, that corporate sustainability communication is sustainable, if corporations change their actual conditions (rules and resources) within their own structure, within their stakeholder networks and, beyond these transformations, have an evolutionary response in their environment. This “response” needs to be further explored, conceptually and analytically!

The question that guides the theoretical and empirical section of the paper therefore is: Where are we now? Did organizations, and especially energy corporations as one of the industry sectors that has always been at the forefront of Environmental, CSR, Sustainability and ESG reporting, actually induce social change? Did they form and cultivate new rules, cultural patterns and potentially establish new norms and guiding principles such as sustainability in their own organizational structure and beyond, in their surroundings? To be more concrete: do they follow sustainability predominantly on a topical or already on a normative level? Is sustainability still an issue they talk about and as such a “guiding topic” or is it already a “guiding principle” ([Weder, 2023b](#); [Rettler and Röttger, 2023](#)) – also guiding their own communication endeavors?

While existing strategic sustainability communication research (conceptually and analytically) predominantly differentiates between communication *of* CSR and sustainability (i.e. reporting) and communication *about* CSR and sustainability (i.e. “Sustainability PR” and “Sustainability Marketing” or media discourses on sustainability), the paper at hand expands on existing work on a third dimension, the dimension of communication *for* sustainability and transformation ([Golob et al., 2023](#); [Weder and Erikson, 2023](#); [Newig et al., 2013](#)). Because still, there is work missing that looks at the *character* of corporate communication in terms of its transformative (or transformational?) potential related to their organizational environment and thus the factors of or conditions for *sustainable communication* ([Weder, 2023b](#); [Pleil et al., 2021](#); [Rettl and Röttger, 2023](#)).

[Weder \(2023a\)](#) also points to the missing research on changes *within* organizations and recommended interviews with members of the corporates of the sample as the first step to monitor communicative niche construction as cultivation process of sustainability as guiding principle of all corporate action. Therefore, with an analytical deep dive (case study) into corporate communication material (non-financial reporting) of an energy corporation (OMV, 1999–2022) and an additional set of expert interviews ($n = 5$), this paper delves into the performative and therefore potentially also transformational potential of corporate

communication to offer an answer to the question of how (much) sustainability actually guides corporate communication – and in which activities this could be translated.

With this paper and the case study, we intend to further develop the *theoretical conceptualization of corporate sustainability communication*, contribute to corporate communication research in general and expand the thinking on sustainability as guiding principle for corporate communication and thus the idea of *sustainable corporate communication*.

Sustainable corporate communication – a conceptual perspective

We are at the brink of a catastrophic crisis. Natural disasters, health crises and political instability changed the environment of all kinds of organizations and called for action and adaptation. The overarching question occupies organizational communication scholars and strategic communication professionals in particular: How can corporate communication contribute to the survival and the development of organizations, their stakeholder and communities – and, beyond this, the human species and the planet? In this first, conceptual part of the paper, we will briefly sketch existing approaches to define corporate communication in the sustainability context (corporate sustainability communication). We will further develop a new concept of sustainable corporate communication, based on an innovative perspective on strategic communication as niche construction introduced by [Weder \(2023a\)](#). The paper is used as a starting point to then develop categories to describe the *sustainability of corporate communication* and to differentiate between transformative and transformational communication and related examples.

Corporate sustainability communication – where are we now?

At the brink of the climate tipping point, stakeholder allocate responsibility in a social, environmental and economic dimension so it becomes more complex to get the social license to operate ([Hurst and Johnston, 2021](#)) and create opportunities to take the responsibility without being (over)aspirational ([Christensen et al., 2013](#)) or not remaining on an abstract or conceptual level of defining the willingness to foster socio-ecological-economic justice for present and future generations (WCED, 1987). Especially in Europe, new regulatory frameworks like the EU supply chain initiative/act or the CSRD, Corporate Sustainability Reporting Directive [1], guide companies' activities, their impact on people and the environment and their regular reporting on social and environmental risks. By the same time, catalogs of criteria in an environmental, social and governance dimension (ESG [2]) help shareholders to consider their investment decisions in the financial sector.

Transformation is a societal ([Kollmorgen et al., 2015](#)) and cultural ([Weder, 2023b](#)) process shaped by different actors, their doing – and their arguments in various public discourses and thus, their communication. Therefore, also corporate sustainability communication goes beyond voluntary engagement and “ethical” management concepts (Corporate Social Responsibility, [Rasche et al., 2023](#)). Next to environmental, social and governance considerations, there is another, very specific responsibility: a communicative responsibility ([Weder and Karmasin, 2017](#)) and, thus, agency to contribute to sustainable development as a normative goal by communicating in a sustainable way ([Servaes, 2022](#)). Communicative responsibility is allocated by or taken in the relationships between an organization, here (and in the following) between a corporate, and specific societal groups, organizational stakeholders and the wider organizational “socio-political environment” ([Zerfaß et al., 2020](#); [Verčič et al., 2015](#)). These relationships include immediate crisis responses ([Tkalac Verčič et al., 2019](#)), forms of legitimization communication ([Crumley et al., 2022](#)) and the production and reproduction of communicative relationships considering their resonance and impact ([Weder et al., 2019a](#)).

The communicative relationships between corporations and their environment are further differentiated in terms of the direction of the communication, their function and their more or less participatory and contestational character. From a strategic communication research perspective, this goes back to the differentiation between one-way and two-way or asymmetric and dialogical communication (Grunig and Kim, 2021; Kent, 2017). It is also essentially influenced by social science paradigms of a rather pragmatic, functional and instrumental understanding of communication as “tool” to inform audiences and transmit knowledge on the one hand and a constitutive, critical understanding of communication as social practice, a form of interaction and a sense- and meaning making process on the other hand (i.e. Röttger, 2022; Jarolimek and Weder, 2017).

Based on these paradigms, Weder started to differentiate between communication *of* CSR and sustainability (directed *towards* their communicative environment), communication *about* CSR and sustainability (negotiation processes *in* the public, issue management) and communication *for* sustainability and transformation (participatory forms of negotiating values and principles, development of alternatives to established narratives and patterns of behavior within the organization *and* the environment), Weder (2021), Weder and Erikson (2023). This is also inspired and influenced by a similar differentiation between communication *of* and *about* sustainability (CoS and CaS) presented by Newig *et al.* (2013). The last-mentioned authors talk about the distinction between sustainability reporting (information/potentially greenwashing) and discourses (intended to impede genuine sustainable development). They also differentiate between more defensive and more articulated, transformative communication, which would then be communication *for* sustainability, which Weder and Erikson (2023) added as third dimension to their framework (see Figure 1. below):

These three dimensions of sustainability communication have been adapted for literature analyses in corporate communication, advertising and marketing communication (Golob *et al.*, 2023) and Public Relations Research (Rettler and Röttger, 2023). The main body of research however still focuses on communication *of* sustainability – sustainability issues, strategies, practices and projects; and corporate reporting is the most common resource for related empirical analyses (i.e. Bowers, 2010). Furthermore, from a terminological point of view, CSR and CSR communication have been the core concepts used in these studies in the earlier 2000s (Golob *et al.*, 2013). Later, a critical phase exploring greenwashing (Elving *et al.*, 2015) and aspirational talk (Christensen *et al.*, 2013), impact (Weder *et al.*, 2019a) and disclosures (Einwiller and Carroll, 2020; Pollach and Schaper, 2023) followed, complemented by research analyzing CSR communication as communication *about* sustainability and, thus, how sustainability issues are represented in the media (i.e. Fischer *et al.*, 2017; Atanasova, 2019). This led to the current interest of more recent corporate communication research in exploring sustainability as a “new” term, as principle of action and potential new “universal value” guiding corporate communication. New areas of research explore sustainable brands

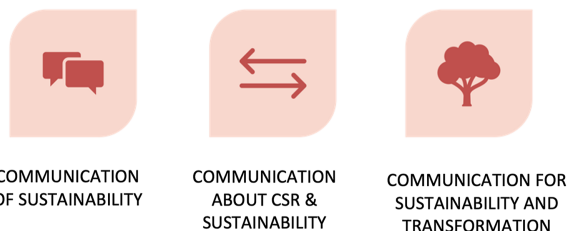


Figure 1.
Communication of,
about and for
sustainability

Source(s): Adapted from Weder and Erikson (2023)

(Lahtinen and Närvänen, 2020), employer branding (Andersen *et al.*, 2013), internal sustainability communication and value creation for employees (Verčič *et al.*, 2015) and sustainable consumption (Stadlthanner *et al.*, 2022). These studies show that the transformative role of strategic – and particularly corporate – communication *for* sustainable development is now getting more attention in academic research and corporate communication practice (Weder, 2022); however, at least so far, it is still mostly talked about in terms of the goals (social change, great transformation, Agenda 2030, etc.), but only rarely related to the *character* of corporate communication and the transformative potential of communicative action, as we will show in the following subchapter.

Corporate communication for sustainability – thinking about a fourth dimension

As mentioned, the rare work on communication *for* sustainability or PR *for* sustainable development focuses predominantly on sustainable development or socio-ecological transformation as goal and the strategic approaches to reach it. In terms of the overarching goal of societal change or sustainable development and related objectives, the United Nations offer a colorful framework of 17 goals. The goals of the related strategic communication efforts are consequently information (i.e. reporting), issue management and two-way interactions with certain publics, which rather sits at the intersection between communication *of* and *about* CSR (see again Weder and Erikson, 2023; Newig *et al.*, 2013).

However, as already envisioned above, to conceptualize corporate communication *for* sustainability needs to go beyond communication that follows more or less specific goals (SDGs: society instead of market orientation) or new modes and tactics of communication (i.e. dialogical, two-way, engaging, etc.). Instead, strategic communication *for* sustainability needs to include thinking about its resonance and impact. Then, corporate communication is a social function (Sandhu, 2019) in transformation processes, and we need to conceptually include the idea of change happening between individuals and/or organizations and not just by one actor doing something different following a specific goal. Corporate communication *for* sustainability therefore needs to also be open to the impact of the environment *on* the organizational structures of the corporate and changes that happen *within* the corporate, which is why we want to bring in a fourth dimension, the dimension of *sustainable corporate communication*.

To further explore “being sustainable” as potential character of corporate communication requires a less functional but rather constructivist and or co-constructive perspective on communication, and thus, include participatory and sense-making approaches, mostly applied in organizational communication (i.e. Schoeneborn *et al.*, 2019) or linguistic approaches to business communication (Mautner and Rainer, 2007). Key is to lay the focus also less on the means of communication but rather on the conversations that are created within organizations and between organizations and their stakeholder, where sustainability as principle of action (here: of communication) is negotiated and by the same time guides these conversations. The conversations, the language that is used and how it is used, the narratives created and how (much) these narratives create bindingness across various actors and validity for future (corporate) action is where transformation happens as normalization and/or cultivation of a new guiding principle, of sustainability as new norm (Weder, 2023b, see Figure 2).

Looking back, in the development of CSR communication as a research area (Golob *et al.*, 2013), the question already came up quite early: how can communication products, messages, channels and communicators themselves be sustainable (Prexl, 2010; Sigitzer and Prexl, 2007)? In PR research we also find work on the contribution of strategic communication to the society by refocusing on PR as organizing communication (Valentini, 2021; Vujnovic *et al.*, 2021). We want to enrich this current thinking by bringing in an evolutionary perspective that

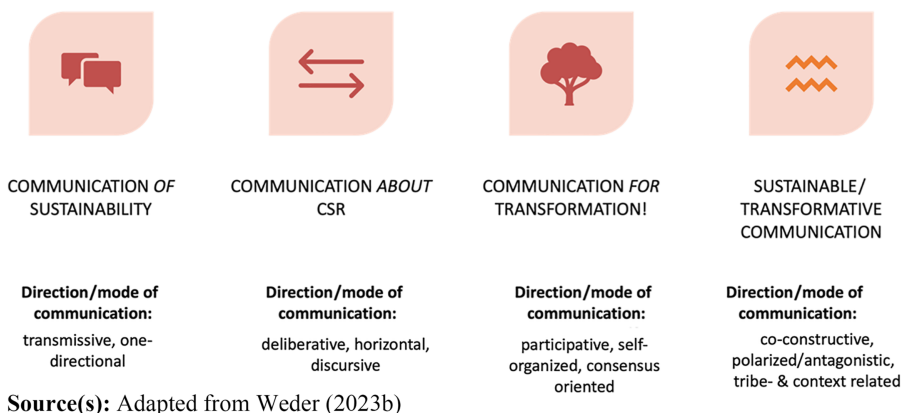


Figure 2.
Four dimensions of sustainability communication

captures transformation and change processes over time and thus corporate communication that is guided by sustainability as principle – and as mode of evaluation, as diagnostic as well as prognostic and motivational attribution (Weder, 2021, p. 104).

Building on this, the next subchapter will offer a new concept that captures what happens if corporate communication is guided by the principle of sustainability itself and helps to differentiate between transformative and transformational corporate communication.

Transformative or transformational? Sustainability as guiding principle of corporate communication

To differentiate between transformative and transformational communication, we draw on an innovative way to conceptualize strategic communication in general and corporate communication in particular in the sustainability context, presented by Weder (2023a). Bringing in evolutionary theory acknowledges that organizations as “species” change their characteristics and their actions over time. The change that happens is firstly described as variation and diversification. Secondly, this always happens at the intersections of the species with its environment (Thagard and Findlay, 2010; Buranyi, 2022). This core idea has been adapted in communication and particularly PR research (Greenwood, 2010; Seiffert-Brockmann, 2018; Nothhaft, 2016; Christensen and Svensson, 2017) and has been recently picked up in a Special Issue of *The International Journal of Strategic Communication* (2023). In this Special Issue, Weder refers to *cultural evolutionary theory*, which seeks to explain the impact of individuals, groups and organizations on their environment – and vice versa, especially the “cultural impact” of the environment on the organization (Laland, 2018). The so-called *niche construction perspective* was introduced and established by the evolutionary biologist Richard Lewontin (1983), who described the impact in the following way: species, individuals or organisms – therefore also organizations – do not just passively adapt through selection or do not just create cultural capital along the way, but actively construct important components of their specific environments or “niches”. Therefore, an organization potentially alters its own environment and thus the norms, behavioral patterns and values of itself and of the individuals and groups in this environment. This changed culture creates options for future action and existence.

However, there are controversial points in applications of niche construction theory. While Weder shows the changes in the environment and how organizations over time (co)

created corporate sustainability communication as niche through sustainability storytelling, there is a lack of understanding of how organisms and, thus, organizations can alter their own constitution and consequently change their selection principles and pressures acting on them. Also, [Aaby and Ramsey \(2022\)](#) mention inconsistencies in standard understandings of a “niche”, especially the ubiquity of niche construction. Their main concern is whether niche construction should be only viewed as a process in addition to standard evolutionary processes such as drift or selection ([Aaby and Ramsey, 2022](#), p. 364) or if we need to also take changed structures (rules and resources) and behavior patterns (culture) into account. This is where sustainability as a guiding principle and binding norm comes in. On our quest to better understand impact and thus sustainability as character of corporate communication, we will follow the authors’ suggestion to differentiate between two variations of alterations happening in organism–environment interactions: *perturbative* and *relocational niche construction*.

- (1) Perturbational niche construction means that organisms modify the selection that they experience through physically changing their environments. This is the kind of niche construction described by [Weder \(2023a\)](#) by looking at the co-creation of the sustainability story as a new niche for corporate communication.
- (2) Relocational means alterations in habitat choices, the actual change of spatiotemporal relationships with their external environment. This is the environmental response that has not been explored so far from a corporate communication perspective.

Both processes can be more reactive or more proactive, captured in niche construction theory as inceptive (creating new selection principles) or counteractive (responding to existing selection principles). Most importantly, Aaby and Ramsay’s work helps to differentiate between transformative and transformational sustainability communication (see [Figure 3](#)).

Translated from niche theory to corporate communication, we describe communication as *transformative* if it is actually a perturbation and modification of the own organizational *processes* and the way the stakeholder-relationships are created and maintained, and *transformational* if it is also relocational in terms of an exploration of new stakeholder, thematic niches or for example new network partners which then includes changes on a structural level. To understand the interplay between perturbation and relocation, we need –

	Perturbative (transformative) communication	Relocational (transformational) communication
<i>Inceptive (proactive)</i>	Organizations communicatively initiate change in their selective environment by modifying their surrounding	Organizations communicatively expose themselves to a novel selective environment by moving to or growing into a new place
<i>Counteractive (reactive)</i>	Organizations communicatively counteract a prior change in the environment by modifying their surroundings	Organisms communicatively respond to a change in the environment by moving to or growing into a more suitable place

Source(s): Adapted from Aaby and Ramsey (2022)

Figure 3.
Perturbative and
relocational
communication

as mentioned above – a less functional but rather social-constructivism oriented perspective on corporate communication and reflect on the constitutive character of conversations within organizations and beyond, in organization–stakeholder relationships and agonistic public discourses (Davidson, 2016). With the help of critical organizational communication and PR theory, we can interpret relocation as actual modifications of organization–environment relationships, organizational structures but also processes. This happens via contestation of existing communication structures and processes and organizing elements like specific arguments, key messages and narratives and exploration of new narratives and spaces for communication.

When existing processes, patterns and related communicative behavior becomes an object of reflection and contestation, established structures and cultural patterns are brought under scrutiny (Foucault, 1988). Consequently, raising the level of inquisitiveness allows the exploration of different ideas and approaches (perspectives) in a participatory way, which is also part of the communication for social change theory, also mentioned above. Weder (2023b) describes *conversational contestation* as problematization and as a performative process which is key for bottom-up transformation and modification of behavioral and thus cultural patterns. Conversational contestation and problematization emerge in projects, interventions and in every corporate communication practice and invite transformation (relocation) of situations. Thus, *transformational communication* includes all forms of cultural or social practices that create disruptions, including corporate activism or interventions. Then, *transformative communication* is the dialectic pendant to breaking up the existing processes and patterns, and changes in selection principles. It includes all changes in existing stakeholder relationships, new rules and policies that are adapted and manifested in the organizational structure. This is related to external changes in organizational environments, like new frameworks (SDGs), political directives (European taxonomy) and also includes for example constitutive the application of CSR and sustainability reporting guidelines (CDAAA, CSRD, see above) or the participation in networks (Global compact, respACT, etc.) and the creation of new stakeholder relationships (public–private partnerships, etc.). Thus, corporate communication is transformative, if the principle of sustainability is anchored through and in new structures. It is transformational to move into a new environment or niche where other actors already act similarly under certain cultural and social conditions, their actions can become a new (or at least changed) practice as well, because a new, potentially more suitable place, always implies new or changed practices (relocation).

The most important learning from niche construction theory therefore is that perturbative and relocational, and therefore transformative and transformational communication are complements and are always happening hand in hand. It is not an either or. Corporate sustainability communication is thus transformational and transformative, if sustainability acts like a cultural compass, actors in a new niche orient themselves towards one another and a culture of sustainability can develop around sustainability as a new norm guiding all social practices – and thus communication. Then a culture of sustainability becomes a “prism” through which we view the world and all corporate communication is guided by this principle of action (Weder, 2023b).

To further explore the transformative and transformational character of corporate sustainability communication, we did an empirical deep dive into non-financial reporting of energy corporations across the globe and looked at one case (OMV) specifically, complemented by ($n = 5$) expert interviews. The empirical study needs to be seen as a case study (Rashid *et al.*, 2019; Yin, 2013), which does not offer data that can be generalized to all corporate communication; nevertheless, it offers learnings and insights related to the conceptual work above, which will be reflected in the discussion after the presentation of the findings.

Sustainability as guiding principle of corporate energy communication – a study

In a polycrisis, corporate communication contributes to the survival of organizations and communities in a changing environment. Energy corporations have played a major role in the evolution of the sustainability story – not only but mainly because of their impact on our definition of how natural resources are dealt with. Energy corporations have been at the forefront of environmental, CSR and sustainability reporting – again: not only, but mainly due to the fact that the generation, production or/and supply of their main products have an immense impact on our natural environment and are therefore directly related to the climate crisis (Elving, 2021). Thus, energy communication has been seen as one of the most important research areas of environmental communication for the last four decades (Weder *et al.*, 2019b; Cox, 2013). More sustainable energy production and supply and new energy projects (infrastructure projects, such as windmills, solar or hydrogen plants, etc.) are highly debated in the media (Schweizer *et al.*, 2016) and need specific strategic energy project communication (Mast and Stehle, 2016), particularly regarding controversies on a local level (Choi *et al.*, 2023).

We will now offer a deep dive into the case of one internationally operating energy corporation (OMV) and apply the conceptual thinking developed above to generate learnings for future corporate sustainability communication practice and research. Exploratory content analytical data will be complemented by five interviews with CSR and sustainability experts – in house (OMV) and from the external environment of the global energy corporation – to capture the environmental response.

Corporate energy communication and framing sustainability – study design, methodology

The OMV is the most important energy supplier in Austria and one of the key oil and gas providers in Europe, with a specific focus on Central Eastern European regions. Over the past few years, the OMV increasingly focused on the Middle East and Africa (OMV, 2018a, b, 2023a, b) and positioned itself as being “committed to building a sustainable world worth living in” (OMV, 2023a). The OMV developed their own definition of sustainability and focuses on climate change, responsible management, health, safety and security, people and ethical business practices.

To further explore the dimensions of transformative and transformational corporate sustainability communication we need to make these two dialectic dimensions of sustainable corporate communication more concrete and, thus, studyable and analyzable. Aaby and Ramsey (2022) develop a more granular concept to differentiate three ways of niche construction where the two dynamics of perturbation (contestation, transformation) and relocation (new structures, institutionalization of sustainability as new norm) intertwine:

Constitutive: niche construction through changing itself, changes in behavior, processes.

Relational: niche construction by changes in the organization-environment (here: stakeholder) relationships.

External: footprint in the environment, changes that happen in the environment that have independent effects; new things that happen there, not necessarily having an effect on the organization (anymore).

Therefore, we offer the following scheme for corporate sustainability communication (see Figure 4), being more explicit about communication *for* sustainability and transformation (constitutive, relational and external) and including both, processes of transformative and transformational communication:

To support this concept with empirical data we used specifically the OMV reports ($n = 19$, 1999–2023, see Figure 5) as text corpus (Bryman, 2016; Mayring, 2019) to learn more about the actual changes and alterations over time. For the analysis, we focused particularly on the

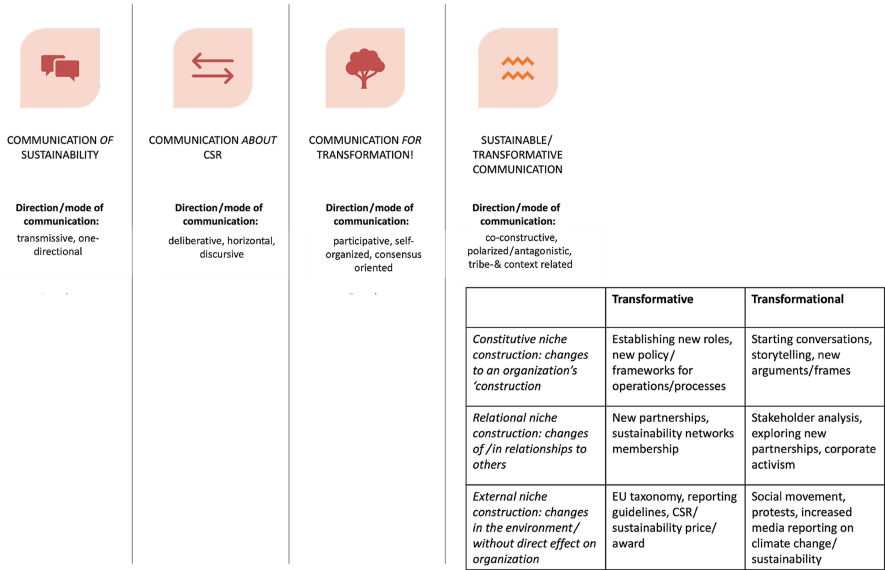


Figure 4. Corporate Sustainability Communication – a framework

Source(s): Adapted and expanded on Weder (2023a, b)

- 2022**

 - 🔗 [OMV Sustainability Report 2022 \(PDF, 8.5 MB\)](#)
 - 🔗 [Sustainability Report 2022 \(Interactive Online Version\)](#)
- 2021**

 - 🔗 [Sustainability Report 2021 \(PDF, 2.6 MB\)](#)
 - 🔗 [Sustainability Report 2021 \(Interactive Online Version\)](#)
- 2020**

 - 🔗 [Sustainability Report 2020 \(PDF, 7.6 MB\)](#)
 - 🔗 [Sustainability Report 2020 \(Interactive Online Version\)](#)
 - 🔗 [OMV – SASB Reporting 2020 \(PDF, 399.6 KB\)](#)
- 2019**

 - 🔗 [Sustainability Report 2019 \(PDF, 11.7 MB\)](#)
 - 🔗 [Sustainability Report 2019 \(Interactive Online Version\)](#)
- 2018**

 - 🔗 [Sustainability Report 2018 \(PDF, 9.0 MB\)](#)
 - 🔗 [Materiality Identification Process \(PDF, 1.4 MB\)](#)
 - 🔗 [TCFD Recommendations Index 2018 \(PDF, 40.1 KB\)](#)
- 2017**

 - 🔗 [Sustainability Report 2017 \(PDF, 5.9 MB\)](#)
 - 🔗 [GRI Index 2017 \(PDF, 1.5 MB\)](#)
- 2016**

 - 🔗 [Sustainability Report 2016 \(PDF, 3.8 MB\)](#)
 - 🔗 [GRI Index 2016 \(PDF, 85.2 KB\)](#)
- 2015**

 - 🔗 [Sustainability Report 2015 \(PDF, 3.7 MB\)](#)
 - 🔗 [GRI Index 2015 \(PDF, 585.1 KB\)](#)
- 2014**

 - 🔗 [Sustainability Report 2014 \(PDF, 4.1 MB\)](#)
 - 🔗 [GRI Index 2014 \(PDF, 562.4 KB\)](#)
 - 📄 [Performance in Detail \(KLS, T2, 9 KB\)](#)
 - 🔗 [Our materiality process in detail \(PDF, 253.7 KB\)](#)
- 2013–2007**

 - 🔗 [Sustainability Report 2013 \(PDF, 3.1 MB\)](#)
 - 🔗 [Sustainability Report 2012 \(PDF, 6.7 MB\)](#)
 - 🔗 [Sustainability Report 2011 \(PDF, 941.7 KB\)](#)
 - 🔗 [Sustainability Report 2010 \(PDF, 6.8 MB\)](#)
 - 🔗 [Sustainability Report 2009 \(PDF, 4.4 MB\)](#)
 - 🔗 [Sustainability Report 2007/2008 \(PDF, 7.9 MB\)](#)
- 2006–2001: CSR Performance Reports**

 - 🔗 [CSR Performance Report 2005/2006 \(PDF, 3.7 MB\)](#)
 - 🔗 [CSR Performance Report 2003/2004, Part 1 \(PDF, 4.8 MB\)](#)
 - 🔗 [CSR Performance Report 2003/2004, Part 2 \(PDF, 5.2 MB\)](#)
 - 🔗 [CSR Performance Report 2001/2002 \(PDF, 1.1 MB\)](#)
- 2006–1999: HSE Reports**

 - 🔗 [HSE Report 2005/2006 \(PDF, 2.3 MB\)](#)
 - 🔗 [HSE Report 2003/2004 \(PDF, 1.7 MB\)](#)
 - 🔗 [HSE Report 2001/2002 \(PDF, 2.1 MB\)](#)
 - 🔗 [HSE Report 1999/2000 \(PDF, 2.0 MB\)](#)

Figure 5. OMV, health, safety, environmental and sustainability reporting

Source(s): OMV, <https://www.omv.com/en/sustainability/reporting-performance>, retrieved Nov. 2023

CEO messages and statements, usually about one page or two pages long, introducing the overarching goals, objectives and strategy of the company at the beginning of a report. These statements offer insights into changes to the organization’s construction and relational niche construction. Therefore, the first research question is:

RQ1. What are the constitutive, relational or external changes mentioned in the reports?

To learn more about external niche construction and how (much) the alterations mentioned in the reports were actually relocational, which would mean that the OMV altered the

relationships with their environment, and if there were/are changes in their environment without a direct effect on the organization (response), we conducted five interviews, one with the OMV sustainability officer (I#0) and four with

- (1) external sustainability PR expert (I#1: PR senior consultant; CEO of PR agency that is focused on sustainability communication; Austria),
- (2) strategists (I#2: circular economy expert/lead of transformation network/program lead at University of Applied Sciences on Sustainability Communication; Austria; I#3: lead communication consultant at business network for transformation; Austria) and
- (3) consultant (I#4: Consultant for Business Ethics and Responsible Communication; Austria). All interview partners are from Austria, OMV's "home country".

The additional research question to be answered with the interview data was:

RQ2. What are current enablers and barriers in corporate sustainability communication?

Overall, the project is conceptualized as a case study (Yin, 2013; Meyer, 2001; Widdowson, 2011), which enables the researcher to take a deep dive into one organizational context, to explore the structures and processes and theorize from the material. The interviews were conceptualized as semi-structured interviews (Bryman, 2016) which have the advantage of being very insightful, especially if they are conducted with leading experts in a field, they offer knowledge that could not have been obtained in any other ways. The downside is their reactivity, in particular if the interviewer has done research in the area of interest (Bryman, 2016). However, expert interviews are a key instrument in explorative research because they can direct to further research questions that can then be answered with more elaborative, potentially quantitative methodologies or mixed-method research designs.

The corporate reporting and the interviews have been treated as text material that we analyzed as a case study with an inductive category formation, following the research questions. We chose this question-led approach used in qualitative content analyses using the open access analysis web-tool QCAmap (Mayring, 2019; Fenzl and Mayring, 2017).

Findings

The case study shows that sustainability is a guiding topic in the reporting, however sustainability related activities are communicated in a way that they are framed as meeting stakeholder expectations and to not become part of a conversational contestation in the public.

Constitutive, relational or external changes mentioned in the reports. The OMV positions itself in a way that the activities and arguments presented in the corporate material are very closely linked to their core business and related operations. With "transparency" being the key value in their relationships with the environment (stakeholder engagement), they focus on an information strategy:

We engage with our stakeholders in a broad range of ways. For all of them, our website, social media activities, annual report, sustainability report, materiality analysis survey and other tools provide transparent information sharing and opportunities to engage. (OMV, 2023a, b)

One of the main objectives of the communication in the reports is to create legitimacy, however, without referring to a specific current or future project – which supports existing research on legitimacy of energy projects (Mast and Stehle, 2016; Weder *et al.*, 2019b) – but much more as a general prerequisite for organizations in the energy sector. This can be

matched with how the OMV sustainability communicator spoke about corporate communication as adaption: “*We listen to the expectations of our stakeholders. They want clean energy – so we try to tell them what we do to reach the goal of cleaner energy in the future*” (I#0, L23). The interview follows closely the messages that are created in the CEO key statement at the beginning of the reports, speaking of a sustainable future. While the earlier reports have a stronger focus on “*sustainable growth through future investments in electricity generation and upstream gas*” (2015), today we still see a very “soft” interpretation of the current crisis as “climate change” (2023) – not as a crisis. A sustainability masterframe was established very early in 2007 (see Figure 5).

The answer to RQ1 therefore is that sustainability is a guiding topic in the reporting especially in the communication of sustainability related issues towards the stakeholder. Linked to “external” crises and key events, the OMV did not really change their thematic focus (weak constitutive niche construction). But there are some transformations that can be detected overtime. In 2023, the OMV follows a strong management approach, has introduced a sustainability officer (“Head of Carbon, Energy and ESG Management”) and follows applicable EU legislation for ESG management (i.e. NFRD/Non-Financial Reporting Directive). Their engagement can also be classified as relational niche construction; they are the leading partner in the Austrian Network for Sustainable Business (respACT) and – as one of the PR experts describes – “*interested in supporting small business to get access to resources like ESG rating agencies, reporting initiatives and other informal networks in the CEE region*” (I#3, L95). To evaluate the external niche construction, we also interviewed a leading sustainability communication expert from the Circular Economy Forum (I#2). The interview partner describes the footprint of corporations and especially the “global players” like the OMV in the following way:

From a critical perspective we have to state that the redundancy of sustainability communication especially around products sold to us as “carbon neutral” or “sustainable” is annoying. But if we wouldn’t have the redundancy – including the fact that even gas and oil is “sold” to us as “carbon efficient” – we would probably not get the relevance. So the communicative footprint of the big energy corporations, and even the OMV, can definitely be seen in again and again communicating that they feel responsible and trying their best to tackle climate change related problems (I#2, L120ff).

Related to these reflections, the OMV did not actually change behavior or attitudes in their environment. However, they are part of a process where corporate sustainability communication stimulated change, the introduction of additional rules and policies and new resources provided for all businesses and organizations. Actual relocation and therefore communicative elements, arguments or new narratives that would go beyond the narrative of growth are nonexistent: “*(even) In a difficult market environment, OMV was once again able to build on the successful financial performance of recent years in 2019. . . . In addition to growing our long-term Company value, we also made substantial progress in repositioning OMV for a lower-carbon future.*” (CEO message, OMV Sustainability report, 2019)

This leads us to the second question (RQ2), exploring the enablers and potential barriers in corporate sustainability communication, barriers for being actually relocational and therefore transformational.

What are current enablers and barriers in corporate sustainability communication? The interviews with corporate communication experts in the organizational environment of the OMV give as a few ideas why sustainability and sustainable development are predominantly used as key terms in a narrative of growth, for example described as eco-efficient growth, following the existing market logic (Weder, 2023a). The main challenge seems to be that they do not leave their communicative territory and try to avoid becoming part of a conversational contestation in the public. The expert for business responsibility and ethics (I#4) articulates the weakness explicitly as a lack of willingness to create reliability:

The key of taking responsibility is not to change themselves and how they narrate themselves. It's easy to add a few keywords. The key is not to say that the aspiration is to keep the stakeholder informed and or to be transparent. The key is to show the weak spots, to create reliability in terms of what is said. This goes beyond responsibility. The key is to change stakeholder – to move from a focus on financial stakeholder to a focus on new stakeholder, networks, NGOs, social movements and others and to be part of public, you know, media discourse out there, around diverse sustainability issues. (I#4, L54ff.)

This is supported by the circular economy forum leader:

We detected the need for offering resources for all kinds of organizations in Austria, like Case Studies, insights in current research, whitepaper or strategies, and policy papers and regulations. Our forum works also as a think tank and is highly supported by political institutions as well. But corporations are not yet interested that much. They don't want to be observed and then maybe criticized in or about an issue they don't control (I#2, L287)

We can also reflect on the insights from the interview insights and CEO message in the reports regarding our overarching research interest: Corporations have institutionalized sustainability and ESG reporting, however, follow sustainability predominantly on a topical and not as much on a normative level. Next to these learnings, with the insights of the case study, we can support at least some aspects of the conceptual thinking that we presented in the theoretical section of the paper. The originality and related implications will be briefly elaborated in the next part of the paper before we end the article with a reflection of the limitation of a case study like the one offered here and an outlook for further research.

Originality and implications

Corporate organizations and business have achieved something remarkable in relation to sustainability: relevance through redundancy. The discourse about climate change, environmental issues and required sustainable practices has been multiplied throughout various forms of text and media and societal subsystems. Sustainability has developed into a “metaculture” which has again implications for corporates and organizations of all shape and scope. Corporate sustainability communication is a niche constructed through sustainability storytelling (Weder, 2023a).

In the paper at hand, we wanted to further explore the character of *corporate sustainability communication* and developed a concept for *sustainable corporate communication*. With the insights into a specific case (OMV/energy corporation) and particularly the interview data from the external environment of the energy corporation, we were able to reflect on the conceptualized differences of transformational and transformative communication (following Aaby and Ramsey, 2022; Newig *et al.*, 2013; Weder and Erikson, 2023). With the empirical data at hand, we can now summarize a few examples for communicative niche construction, differentiated in being transformative (manifestation/institutionalization of alterations) and transformational (exploring new pathways and opportunities in a transformation process), see Figure 6 while we are also able to point to a lack of the latter.

The innovative aspect that emerged with the application of this scheme and conceptualization of niche construction through communication is that perturbative and relocational and, thus, transformative and transformational niche construction are complementary. The case study at hand (OMV/energy corporation) shows that we do see some structural transformations but there is a lack of conversational contestation in corporate sustainability communication – at least looking at the case at hand. What is missing? Firstly, while the case study offered insights into new structures, the communication processes themselves didn't change. We could not identify dialogic communication situations with stakeholders internally and externally (Kent, 2017; Kent and Taylor, 2002) as well as real

	Transformative	Transformational
<i>Constitutive niche construction: changes to an organization's 'construction'</i>	Establishing new roles, new policy/frameworks for operations/processes <i>Ex: Sustainability manager, chief sustainability officer, compulsory sustainability trainings, travel guidelines</i>	Starting conversations, storytelling, new arguments/frames <i>Ex: Think tank, workshop, inhouse trainings</i>
<i>Relational niche construction: changes of/in relationships to others</i>	New partnerships, sustainability networks membership <i>Ex: Network-membership, campaign, regular stakeholder dialogues/workshops/surveys</i>	Stakeholder analysis, exploring new partnerships, corporate activism <i>Ex: NGO-partnerships, community engagement, evaluation & adaption of resources from rating agencies</i>
<i>External niche construction: changes in the environment/without direct effect on organization</i>	EU taxonomy, reporting guidelines, CSR/sustainability price/award <i>Ex: political programs, frameworks, commitments, treaty, COP, Green deal; money spent/funding</i>	Social movement, protests, increased media reporting on climate change/sustainability <i>Ex: friday4future, sustainability influencer, communication pioneers, eco-art</i>

Figure 6. Examples for niche construction through corporate sustainability communication

Source(s): Own research

changes in the organizational environment; especially we miss negotiations and a co-creation of the sustainability story (Weder, 2023a). In the interviews as well in the CEO messages in the corporate reports, we also didn't find any particularly new partnerships mentioned or efforts to start conversations without a predefined goal or expectation to be met. Therefore, we do not see relocation and therefore transformational communication which would have been the complement to the increase in sustainability communication and the institutionalization (sustainability manager, frameworks, guidelines, etc. Schaltegger et al., 2024). One reason for that could be that businesses do not dare to do something new, that they put themselves up for discussion or up for a "conversational contestation" internally and in the discourses around them, in their communicative surroundings, that they do not look at and make use of the new niche.

Limitations, concluding remarks and outlook

The article at hand focuses on corporate sustainability communication and explores the character and the sustainability of corporate communication by applying an evolutionary perspective as heuristic, embedded in a cultural evolutionary perspective. Niche construction affects evolution if environmental conditions are changed significantly, the modifications influence selection principles and there is an evolutionary response in a related "population" or other species (Matthews et al., 2014; Laland et al., 2016).

Based on the theoretical development that the paper offers, sustainable corporate communication following niche construction theory can be firstly captured in three dimensions, constitutive, relational and external communicative niche construction (Aaby and Ramsey, 2022). Secondly, we can explore the character of alterations in the organization-environment interaction and therefore the impact in socio-ecological transformation processes with the differentiation in transformational and transformative. With a case

study complemented by expert interviews, we explored transformative and transformational corporate sustainability communication and identified a lack of transformative communication.

We acknowledge the limitations of a case study and particularly the small sample of experts that have been interviewed (Yin, 2013; Widdowson, 2011). The very narrow perspective that one case represents does not allow any generalizable results. The findings of the qualitative exploratory case study are offering deeper insights into the organization-environment relationship and alterations through corporate communication and how this particularly plays out in the sustainability context. However, the empirical evidence gathered is also liable to more limitations, like the selection bias of the sample of data (non-financial reports) and interview partners (key sustainability communicators in one country). These are aspects which should be considered in further studies and the findings need to be extended and elaborated upon with further studies focusing on different sampling of cases of corporate sustainability communication and experts (i.e. considering a purposive, more heterogeneous sample).

Despite those empirical concerns, by using the concept and lens of communicative niche construction, recently introduced to strategic communication research by Weder (2023a), we were able to develop a framework for *sustainable corporate communication* which speaks of the character of corporate communication and the alterations in organizations and in organization-environment relationships (constitutive, relational, external) which – theoretically – encompass both, transformative and transformational communication processes.

Therefore, we urge to do more research on external niche construction and changes that happen in the environment and communicative surroundings of organizations, for example in think tanks, on podiums and in forums, in business or CEO networks or at roundtables related to a specific issues like circular economy, where the exploration of different ideas and approaches (perspectives) in a participatory or even agonistic way becomes possible; conversational contestation and problematization are key for a deep naturalization of a new norm like sustainability (Weder, 2023a, b). Then, connectability and integrability between various actors becomes key and corporate sustainability communication supports corporations to explore new ground and alternative communicative arenas.

Notes

1. <https://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/EN/TXT/?uri=CELEX:32022L2464>, April 2024.
2. https://finance.ec.europa.eu/sustainable-finance/overview-sustainable-finance_en, April, 2024.

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Corresponding author

Franziska Weder can be contacted at: franziska.weder@wu.ac.at

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