Can content marketing focusing on sustainability drive stakeholder engagement? The case of IKEA Hungary's social media communication about sustainability

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Sustainability communication on social media is a current and complex challenge for companies because of the increasing digitalisation, stakeholders' scepticism, and the importance of sustainable development in companies and people's lives. This study aims to introduce the main theories of content marketing strategy and sustainability communication and show how these concepts can support companies in explaining corporate sustainability messages more engagingly. The article uses IKEA Hungary as an example – the digital content published on social media pages in 2021 was investigated to identify main sustainability topics and messages. The content analysis answers research questions about the factors of stakeholder engagement on social media in sustainability-related topics, and the efficient strategies of sustainability communication through these channels. The main theoretical contribution of the study is that it examines the use of content marketing tools for sustainability communication and stakeholders' engagement in this process, using a relevant example.

Keywords: content marketing, social media, sustainability, sustainability communication, stakeholder engagement.

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Introduction

Companies must reconsider their traditional marketing strategies because of increasing resistance and rejection of brand advertising and customers' growing demand for dialogue with companies. Communication about sustainability is increasingly an expectation from their side. However, it is a very complex communication topic. Getting sustainability messages to stakeholders and regaining lost trust can be challenging for companies.

Companies must emphasise online communication with people spending several hours online every day, especially on social media. A less sales-oriented and more long-term approach is necessary to reach targeted audiences more efficiently. The companies focusing on a brand-building and emotion-provoking

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approach can be more successful. More companies share valuable, customer-related content on their websites or social media pages in response to recent challenges.

The importance of sustainable development has increased significantly in recent years as a response to environmental catastrophes, climate change, social problems, and corporate scandals. The stakeholders of companies require corporate commitment and visible results for these challenges. The 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development defines 17 Sustainable Development Goals (SGDs), adopted by all United Nations Member States in 2015 (United Nations 2015). The goals define a complex sustainability framework for nations and companies and can form the basis for sustainability communication.

The main objective of this study is to introduce content marketing as an efficient online communication strategy for sustainability issues.

The content published by IKEA Hungary on its corporate social media channels in 2021 was analysed to identify key sustainability topics and messages. In addition to communicating the company's efforts and achievements in reducing harmful and negative social, environmental, and ecological impacts, the company also strives to implement awareness-raising and educational communication strategies to encourage its customers to live more sustainably. The study combines the previously mentioned topics and analyses the content marketing strategy focusing on sustainability communication. The literature review summarises the main media consumption trends and introduces the concept of content marketing and the main tools that can be effective in sustainability communication.

The study introduces the emergence and the concept of content marketing, then sustainable development, the other focus of this study. The last part of the theoretical section combines online communication and sustainable development to discuss the primary drivers and tools for online sustainability communication. After describing the applied research methodology, the content marketing strategy of IKEA Hungary is analysed.

Literature review

Definition and main forms of content marketing

Emergence of content marketing

Customers reject advertising to an increasing extent because they feel overloaded by ads. The main reason is that traditional marketing communication

interrupts customers in their experience: it bothers them during work, searching for something, or having fun (Whatmough 2019).

Changes in the traditional media concept "POE" reflect the significant digitalisation of the last decade and represent an effective response to the phenomenon of ad rejection in the form of meaningful content and a higher level of customer engagement in the communication process between companies and customers. The abbreviation "POE" stands for paid, owned, earned media. Companies usually use these three main types of media in their communication strategies. Paid media corresponds to traditional advertising on offline and online channels, while owned media summarises all offline and online content created, shared, and controlled by the company. Earned media mainly means editorial publicity generated by journalists, key opinion leaders, and later influencers. The updated version of "POE" includes a fourth element, shared media; its new name is "PESO". It shows the significant shift toward social media, where companies and customers can create and share content. In addition, all traditional elements are more digital than ever before (Macnamara et al. 2016).

New elements were added to owned media, like content marketing, brand journalism, employee and customer stories, and a variety of audio, visual and video content. Earned media concentrates on cooperation with different types of content creators, journalists, influencers, bloggers, and word-of-mouth. The new dimension, shared media, includes the content shared in social forums or as organic reviews (Dietrich 2021). Among the four dimensions, owned media has the highest importance because quality content provides the basis for a successful communication strategy, as it can generate long-term business impacts and brand favourability (Bayles 2015). When companies put content at the heart of their strategy, it is called content marketing.

Definition of content marketing

The Content Marketing Institute defined content marketing as "a strategic marketing approach focused on creating and distributing valuable, relevant, and consistent content to attract and retain a clearly defined audience and, ultimately, to drive profitable customer action" (Content Marketing Institute 2012).

The most important value of this strategic approach is the lower level of rejection because it is a less intrusive marketing tool, as pointed out by Philip Kotler and his co-authors: "It uses a mix of entertainment, education, and inspiration to attract attention without the hard sell." (Kotler et al. 2021. 119)

Based on the definitions introduced before, it can be concluded that content marketing is a strategy that focuses on creating and sharing emotion-stirring content with potential and established customers.

Business relevance of content marketing

Content marketing is more relevant to customers compared to advertising. While advertising focuses on the company and its marketing objectives, content marketing approaches customers by responding to their needs and questions. It can support them in their customer decision-making process or in reaching their objectives (Kotler et al. 2017). Delivering valuable information is key to content marketing. This way, companies can earn the attention of their customers. Creating and sharing valuable guides connected closely or indirectly to the company's field of activity are gestures with a long-term business impact (Sas 2018).

It can convert prospects to customers or help nurture and retain existing customers. Focusing less on short-term sales objectives and creating content with a less explicit sales intent can boost revenues if the content is relevant to customers (Kotler et al. 2020). Today's customers are more actively searching for information during their customer journey. Instead of companies' push media, they prefer pulled media (Chaffey–Ellis-Chadwick 2019). It means that companies should produce relevant and helpful content continuously so as to be able to reach customers when they need it (Kotler et al. 2020).

Customer preferences

While creating content, companies should always keep in mind that using the internet or being active in social media, learning more about companies and their products or services is not the primary motivation of customers to use the internet. Although 61% of them use the internet to find information, they prefer watching videos, TV shows or movies (51.5%) or researching how to do things (51%) instead of reading or watching marketing messages. The main reasons for using social media are very similar. People would like to fill up spare time (36%) or to find funny or entertaining content (32%) (We Are Social–Hootsuite 2022). However, if companies succeed in integrating their marketing messages into entertaining content, they can win customers for themselves. Content can be considered an additional, intangible product that companies offer their customers. That is why the content strategy, the business strategy and core corporate values should be aligned (Kotler et al. 2020).

What can be content? It can have various forms based on the aim, the target audience, and the channel where it will be shared. Companies traditionally produce written content (newsletters, reports, press releases, magazines), while customers nowadays prefer more entertaining formats, like videos, infographics, or games (Kotler et al. 2017). Funny or touching content can later be shared by the customers and become viral. That is one example of a successful content marketing strategy. In the following two sub-sections, two other strategic approaches will be introduced.

Forms of engagement in social media

The so-called COBRA (Consumer Online Brand-Related Activities) Model identifies three different levels of social media engagement: consumption refers to the minimum level of engagement when users consume (watch, view) the content. A contribution is a form of interaction (like, share, comment) on brand-related content. The creation of brand-related content is the highest level of engagement (Schivinski et al. 2016). This article focuses on the most widespread type of engagement, contribution.

On Facebook, users can "like" the posts (using the thumb up or other emoticons), leave a comment or share the post with their followers. From a brand perspective, the level of interactions matters, as it influences the reach of corporate posts. Reach means the number of followers who will see the given post in their newsfeeds (Jayasingh–Venkatesh 2015). These measures of interactions represent the level of engagement (Viglia et al. 2018).

On Instagram, the only available metric is the number of likes. However, Instagram started to remove the display of likes on Instagram posts in several countries (Trunfio–Rossi 2021). In the case of YouTube, the number of video views, likes and comments are the most typical measures of engagement (Yang et al. 2022).

Content Marketing Matrix

The Content Marketing Matrix is a well-known strategy for content marketing. It was developed by Dave Chaffey and Dan Bosomworth. The concept distinguishes four types of content by the method of persuasion and its role in the customer journey. The method of persuasion can be either rational or emotional. Depending on the function in the customer journey, it can focus on raising customers' awareness or convincing them to purchase the product or the service. The combinations of these two variables generate the four main categories of the Content Marketing Matrix (Chaffey–Ellis-Chadwick 2019):

- *Educate*: the content raises customers' awareness using rational argumentation. Typical examples: guides, infographics, and articles.
- *Convince*: the main aim of the content is to convince customers about the purchase, using demos, checklists, case studies, datasheets, or price guides.
- *Entertain*: the content can be used at the beginning of the customer decision-making process to raise customers' awareness by entertaining them with quizzes, competitions, games, and viral or branded videos.
- *Inspire*: the content can convince customers about purchasing the product or service by inspiring them with community forums, celebrity endorsements or events.

Content marketing is not new; Campbell, well-known for its canned soups, distributed free booklets with recipes using Campbell's soups as ingredients more than 100 years ago (Bly 2020). As a result of increasing ad rejection, social media usage, and altered communication strategies striving to get more closely connected to customers, it has become popular again in the last few years.

Definition and main fields of sustainable development

Sustainable development is not a new concept either; it emerged in recent years as a global answer for countries and companies to environmental catastrophes, climate change, social problems, and corporate scandals. This section will summarise the definition of sustainability, its importance from a stakeholder point of view, and its significance in the retail industry.

Definition of sustainable development

According to the definition of the United Nations: "Sustainable development is development that meets the needs of the present without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs" (WCED 1987. 41).

All United Nations Member States adopted the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) in 2015. The concept defines 17 economic, environmental, and social goals, summarising 169 global targets to be achieved by 2030. It was built on the foundations of the previous initiative, the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs), which more than 178 countries adopted at the Earth Summit in Rio de Janeiro, Brazil, in 1992. The main goal of that initiative was to reduce extreme poverty by 2015 (United Nations 2015). The 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development is considered a blueprint "for peace and prosperity for people and the planet, now and into the future" (United Nations 2015).

The European Union has also defined sustainable development as one of its long-term objectives: "The Union shall establish an internal market. It shall work

for the sustainable development of Europe based on balanced economic growth and price stability, a highly competitive social market economy, aiming at full employment and social progress, and a high level of protection and improvement of the quality of the environment. It shall promote scientific and technological advance." (EU 2012. 3(3)).

As we can understand from the definition, besides economic growth, social and environmental aspects became priorities of the European Union. Besides serving as a roadmap for sustainable development and tackling climate change challenges for the United Nations and its member states, companies have also started to use the SDGs as a framework for their sustainable development strategies. Corporate sustainability aims to find the right balance between economic, environmental, and social aspects. This approach is called People, Planet and Profit or triple bottom line. Companies not only measure and report their performance on relevant indicators but organisational values and processes follow these principles, too (Carroll et al. 2018).

Main fields of sustainability in the retail sector

Retailers have a significant role in motivating and supporting customers to switch to a more sustainable lifestyle. Companies can change their customers' preferences with the help of the products offered and the information shared about them. Companies operating in this industry can act as gatekeepers because their product range and the quality standards they apply can significantly influence shopping behaviour. Retailers face increasing customer expectations regarding soft factors, such as being more environmentally friendly, sustainable, and taking social factors into account, as well as sharing information about these topics (Knoppe 2015). Table 1 summarises the main fields of sustainability in the retail sector.

Customers are increasingly aware of the influence and power they have. The latest customer trust research confirms this trend: 68% of customers believe they have the power to force companies to change (Edelman 2021a). Moreover, if we focus on companies' social impacts, 78% of respondents believe they can force brands to change their social impacts. For example, to use environmentally friendly materials (39%), improve labour practices (38%) or reduce their carbon footprint (37%) (Edelman 2021b).

Table 1. Main fields of sustainability in the retail sector

Field	Main areas
Environment & Product Sustainability	• Sustainable product range • Presentation and marketing of sustainable products • Responsible use of the environment and resources • Product safety
Ethical & Local Sourcing	• Environmental and social standards in the supply chain • Human rights, fair remuneration, safety at work
Gender & Diversity	• Treatment of employees • Equality at the workplace
Community Support	• Transparent communication of value creation • Customer information about sustainability • Community engagement

Source: Knoppe 2015. 17

According to Sughra (2021), retail companies should consider sustainability a long-term investment and opportunity for value proposition because focusing on social, environmental, and economic issues will maintain customers' trust and goodwill and increase profit. Customers are the key drivers of companies becoming more sustainable. Retailers share and, to some extent, forward these expectations to their supply chain and expect their suppliers to implement social and environmental standards. As a result of increasing online presence and social media usage, customers are more informed than ever. Therefore, a good relationship between companies and customers is important. Community engagement is one way of building stronger customer relationships and increasing sales simultaneously.

Main strategies of sustainability communication

Communication about sustainability requires a paradigm shift on the companies' side, considering potential benefits, target audiences, main messages, and the type of communication. This section introduces the main types, styles, and techniques of sustainability communication, focusing on online communication.

According to Pérez and Rodriguez, sustainability communication "refers to the information disclosed by companies about those activities undertaken and that demonstrate the inclusion of economic, social and environmental commitments in the trade operations of companies as well as in the relationships with the groups of interest" (Pérez–Rodriguez 2015. 316).

Corporate benefits of sustainability communication

As a result of previous corporate scandals, stakeholders' concerns about companies' environmental and social impacts have increased. Their growing social and environmental expectations have threatened corporate reputation and legitimacy. It forces companies to redefine business-society relationships and create a new form of corporate legitimacy and open dialogue in society (Colleoni 2013). It has become a driver of corporate reputation due to the increased level of stakeholders' awareness of sustainability, which motivates companies to concentrate more on non-financial issues. Besides being egoistic (self-serving approach), a value-driven company or having a strategic focus on social and environmental issues, meeting stakeholders' expectations is one main driver for companies to adopt the triple-bottom-line approach. People usually perceive corporate efforts as value-driven or strategic if a good fit exists between companies' impacts and sustainability initiatives (Coombs–Holladay 2012). Sustainability has become a priority in brand management in recent years. Although many companies still do not integrate sustainability values into their brand identities, many already use sustainability as a supplemental part of their brand positioning. A few companies use it as a core of their brand positioning, for example, Body Shop (Brunner–Langner 2017).

Communicating corporate sustainability goals and achievements can enhance corporate reputation and help people identify themselves with the company. Nevertheless, companies should try to find the right balance in their communication activities because stakeholders may reject a company if they have the feeling that it communicates too much about its efforts in this field (Coombs–Holladay 2015). While being perceived as a responsible and sustainable company is more important for companies than ever, it can quickly become the "Catch-22" as research results show that the companies actively communicating about their sustainability are intensively criticised by their stakeholders. The critical challenge is getting the sustainability message across to stakeholders without being discredited because they are too "loud" in communicating about sustainability-related activities (Morsing et al. 2008). A too intensive and not credible enough communication about corporate goals and achievements can be perceived as "greenwashing" by stakeholders (Sharma et al. 2021). It can create a boomerang effect, making stakeholders more cynical about excessive self-promotion of the companies (Coombs–Holladay 2012).

Main strategies and styles of sustainability communication

Traditional corporate communication usually follows the one-way communication model, with a one-to-many approach, where the company shares its messages with its audiences and has complete control over its communication channels (Crane–Livesey 2003). Corporate reports, websites, and newsletters can be mentioned as typical examples. These communication instruments do not address stakeholder involvement at all.

The two-way communication model requires efforts and openness from both sides. Two types of this strategy can be distinguished: asymmetric or symmetric (Morsing–Schultz 2006). The company dominates asymmetric or monologic two-way communication by initiating and controlling the exchange of information and opinions. The organisation can demonstrate openness towards its stakeholders by researching them, but the chances of inducing changes are relatively low (Lukács 2015).

Symmetric or honest two-way communication aims to start a meaningful dialogue and co-create a common understanding and changes in corporate or stakeholder strategies. When implementing this communication strategy, companies ask for their stakeholders' advice and discuss sustainability-related issues with them (Vollero et al. 2016). Representatives of different stakeholder groups can participate actively in stakeholder engagement forums or stakeholder advisory boards (Lukács 2015).

The stakeholder response and involvement strategies focus more on stakeholder engagement, which supports the transparency process and provides a more transparent picture of corporate sustainability efforts (Coombs–Holladay 2012). The main difference is the level of control; while stakeholder response tools are initiated and controlled by the company, stakeholder involvement instruments create more symmetrical power relations, empowering stakeholders to actively participate in shaping current and future sustainability strategies. Table 2 summarises the main characteristics of the three sustainability communication strategies, including typical examples.

The stakeholder information strategy includes the most traditional communication tools implemented by companies to communicate about their sustainability-related goals and achievements. As this study focuses on content marketing, part of the stakeholder information and response strategies, the introduction of sustainability communication tools will focus on content platforms, especially social media.

Table 2. Three sustainability communication strategies

Name of the CSR communication strategy	Main characteristics	Examples
The stakeholder information strategy	• Communication ideal: public information, one-way communication • Stakeholder role: support or oppose • Strategic communication task: inform stakeholders about favourable sustainability decisions and actions	• Paid media: online and offline campaigns • Owned media: content platforms (corporate website, blog, social media communication, newsletter), non-financial report, event, packaging • Earned media: press release, influencer marketing
The stakeholder response strategy	• Communication ideal: two-way asymmetric communication • Stakeholder role: respond to corporate actions • Strategic communication task: demonstrate to stakeholders how the company integrates their concerns	• Stakeholder engagement in social media • Stakeholder questionnaire • Stakeholder focus group • Ad hoc stakeholder advisory meeting • Hotline • Online feedback and discussion forum • Donation, Cause-Related Marketing
The stakeholder involvement strategy	• Communication ideal: two-way symmetric communication • Stakeholder role: involvement, participation, suggestions • Strategic communication task: invite and establish a frequent, systematic, and proactive dialogue with stakeholders	• Stakeholder engagement forum • Stakeholder Advisory Panel • Online engagement mechanism • Integration of stakeholders into corporate decision-making processes • Involvement of stakeholders in the investigation of issues, reporting, and policy development

Source: Lukács 2015. 9; Morsing-Schultz 2006. 326

The Italy-based sustainability communications agency Lundquist analysed the sustainability communication of the Top 50 European companies on their corporate websites and social media channels in 2019. As a result, five *communication styles* were identified based on substance and distinctiveness

(Lundquist 2020). Substance is the dimension that evaluates the sustainability approach and transparency of the company, focusing on the amount of information shared and explained. Distinctiveness measures how engaging the content is for stakeholders. The combination of these two dimensions and the high or low level of implementation defines the framework of a 2x2 matrix and the four different communication styles. The fifth category is the "*Sleepers*", those companies that have not yet recognised the importance of communicating about sustainability to their stakeholders.

The "*Traditionalists*" share some information about this topic, but it is neither transparent nor easy to understand. These companies rather focus on compliance disclosure and technical data. The "*Explainers*" publish lots of texts, numbers, and documents, they explain it at a rational level, but the communication is not engaging. "*Glitterati*" companies are just the opposite. These companies put much effort into a very engaging, visually striking sustainability communication to show their commitment, but it is superficial and often lacking concrete information about strategic goals and initiatives. The "*Narrators*" can effectively integrate the rational and emotional components when communicating about sustainability. Their communication is rich in information but still comprehensive and engaging.

Role of engagement in sustainability communication

The internet has become an ideal tool for companies to build their corporate reputation, where they inform and persuade their stakeholders about organisational performance. Online tools for sustainability communication show a higher level of commitment to honesty and transparency on the corporate side. It is an opportunity to better understand stakeholders' concerns and priorities in order to solve these problems. Stakeholders can be active senders of information and connect via social media, supporting the distribution of information between companies, organisations, and stakeholders (Capriotti 2017).

The non-hierarchical communication solutions like social media platforms offer authenticity, transparency, and credibility, which can positively impact companies' image (Reichert 2017). Social media platforms represent a good two-way communication opportunity for companies and their stakeholders. While companies usually use them only to share sustainability updates regularly, they can also start dialogues and discussions with their stakeholders. It can also help in learning more about stakeholders' issues or concerns, assessing to what extent stakeholders are aware of corporate initiatives and their reactions to

them, increasing awareness of sustainability initiatives and providing a platform for stakeholder engagement (Coombs–Holladay 2012). The popular platforms Facebook, Twitter, and Instagram are more suitable for virtual conversation, while YouTube mainly serves as a platform for sharing corporate videos about sustainability-related topics.

Nevertheless, only sharing information is not enough anymore. Stakeholders expect companies to use two-way, interactive communication tools and engage in dialogue with them. Research shows the importance of social media in corporate communication about sustainability. As much as 80% of respondents expressed their expectation for companies to engage with them on social media to solve environmental and social challenges (Ali et al. 2015). However, many companies still follow an outdated communication strategy and use social media as a traditional channel to broadcast sustainability-related information. Instead, they could utilise the advantages of social media channels to engage and build relationships with their stakeholders (Gomez 2021).

In recent research, Berestova and her co-authors (2022) analysed sustainability-focused corporate messages on Twitter. They found that when companies tweeted more on social issues, the engagement of all posts (retweets, quotes) increased. Communicating about sustainability topics might improve customer engagement with brands, but an open stand on controversial issues might have a reverse effect. However, the research conducted by Okazaki and Menendez (2017) found that the level of interactions among analysed global firms was very low, with a high number of customer-customer interactions. They studied the use of Twitter for virtual sustainability dialogue. ElAlfy and his co-authors (2020) identified the most frequently mentioned SDGs on Twitter which were: “Good Health and Wellbeing” (SDG3), “Gender Equality” (SDG5), “Affordable and Clean Energy” (SDG7), “Industry, Innovation, and Infrastructure” (SDG9). Their research results show that companies focus on the SDGs related to their core business in their social media communication. It is proof that companies take sustainability seriously and that the SDGs are a helpful framework for corporate sustainability strategies.

From a customer point of view, sustainability messages need to be emotions-evoking and compelling (Knight et al. 2022). If a social media post can generate positive emotions like amusement, excitement or inspiration, more users will share it with their followers (Tellis et al. 2019).

Research aim and methodology

The main aim of the research was to prepare a case study, introducing the main characteristics of sustainability communication of IKEA Hungary. The company was selected based on the author's previous knowledge of its complex content marketing strategy. While the company's website offers extensive sustainability information, including the sustainability report, the analysis was limited to social media communication, as this offers the highest reach and engagement opportunities.

The 17-year-old Ingvar Kamprad founded IKEA in Älmhult, Sweden, in 1943. Initially, he sold watches and pens by mail order (IKEA 2021). IKEA opened its first store in Hungary in 1990. It operates two stores in Budapest, at Örs vezér tere and Soroksár, as well as at Budaörs (IKEA Magyarország 2020). During the financial year 2020, the company generated an annual turnover of 98 billion forints and recruited 180 more people. The volume of online sales has doubled compared to the previous year, accounting for almost 14% of total sales (IKEA Magyarország 2021a).

The core corporate values of the company are (IKEA Magyarország 2021b):

- *Togetherness*: This is at the heart of the company culture. Strength comes from trusting each other, pulling in the same direction, and having fun.
- *Caring for people and planet*: The company has the possibility and the responsibility to make an impact on current and future generations.
- *Cost-consciousness*: Offering affordable solutions to beautiful and functional homes without compromising quality.
- *Simplicity*: Down-to-earth way of being, staying close to reality, being informal and pragmatic.
- *Renew and improve*: Improving constantly, finding solutions to future challenges.
- *Different with a meaning*: Questioning existing solutions, thinking in unconventional ways, and experimenting.
- *Give and take responsibility*: Empowering people, giving, taking responsibility, trusting each other, being positive and forward-looking.
- *Lead by example*: Leadership in action, "walk the talk" leaders, bringing out the best in each other.

The main research questions of the social media content analysis of IKEA Hungary were:

- R1: Considering Knoppe's (2015) categories, which fields of sustainability communication drive the highest stakeholder engagement?
- R2: Considering the sustainable development goals, what are the main foci of corporate sustainability communication?
- R3: Considering the sustainable development goals, which fields of sustainable communication drive the highest stakeholder engagement?
- R4: Which social media channel drives the highest stakeholder engagement?
- R5: Considering the content marketing matrix, which type of content marketing drives the highest stakeholder engagement?
- R6: Which sustainability communication style drives the highest stakeholder engagement?

The social media content analysis method was chosen to analyse the social media communication of IKEA Hungary about sustainability. This method focuses on collecting, summarising, and analysing social media content. The main advantages of content analysis are: it provides a profound insight into a topic, it is highly effective, and social media content is widely accessible and available in electronic format. Content analysis can help understand people's perceptions in an online environment (Lai–To 2015).

In the first step, the social media content published on corporate channels between 1 January and 1 December 2021 was investigated to identify main sustainability topics and messages. IKEA Hungary has official social media accounts on Facebook, Instagram, and YouTube. These three channels were considered during the data collection process. In the next stage of the research, only those posts related to sustainability were included in the analysis. The related posts were processed and coded by category in Excel, focusing on the main message, the SDG they belonged to, and the reach and engagement of the post.

Based on the characteristics of the analysed platforms, different, publicly available indicators were examined to measure engagement:

- In the case of Facebook, likes (all emoticons), comments, and shares are the most relevant metrics.
- On Instagram, only the number of likes is available on the corporate account.
- In the case of YouTube, the number of views and the number of reactions (likes and dislikes) are available as relevant statistics. The number of comments

was excluded from the analysis, as it was disabled for several videos due to the controversial topic.

Of course, several other metrics are available in the analytics of the analysed platforms, but the author did not have access to the corporate profiles. A total number of 42 social media posts were identified. The topics and initiatives were investigated in the last stage of the research. Based on the literature review and the dataset, the researcher analysed the sustainability communication style and described it using the theories introduced in the literature review.

Results

This section will summarise the sustainability-focused content marketing strategy of IKEA Hungary as a case study. First, IKEA Hungary, then its social media channels will be introduced. The main sustainability initiatives are introduced to describe the company's online sustainability communications and its style of communication.

Main social media channels

Altogether, 42 social media posts were shared about social and environmental initiatives on the three analysed channels in the first 11 months of 2021. The company was most active on Facebook; it seems to be its primary social media channel for sustainability-related issues and sharing information about promotions or the company. The reason for the high number of followers is that Facebook shows the sum of followers for all IKEA Facebook channels. There was no local data available for the Hungarian Facebook account only.

Instagram is being used somewhat as a source of inspiration, sharing mainly inspirational photos about homes furnished with IKEA furniture, latest products, and decoration tips. It is the company's youngest platform; the first post was shared more than five years ago. By 2021, 23 posts were published, and 9 have a connection to sustainability.

YouTube was the first social media channel of IKEA Hungary; the corporate channel was started ten years ago. It has more than 8,000 followers, but it is not the heart of the content marketing strategy. In 2021, altogether, 30 videos were published on this channel. The company uses it mainly to share promotional videos, but 10 of the 30 videos introduced the sustainability-related initiatives of the company.

For these three channels, the number of followers (as of 1 December 2021) and the account creation date are shown in Table 3.

Table 3. IKEA Hungary's social media channels

Social media channel	Number of followers	Active since
Facebook	31 210 356	27 November 2012
Instagram	86 900	5 September 2016
YouTube	8 030	19 January 2012

Source: Social media accounts of IKEA Hungary

Main fields of sustainability communication

Table 4 summarises the main sustainability initiatives of IKEA Hungary, which were mentioned at least on one social media channel, following Knoppe's concept (Knoppe 2015). Out of the four categories, no posts were shared about *Ethical and local sourcing* during the analysed period. The *Community Support* category includes most of the initiatives, implementing various environmental and social programmes.

Environment & Product Sustainability is a significant domain for the company as a retail industry representative. Retailers can raise customers' awareness and demand for sustainable solutions by offering a more sustainable product range.

There were only a few posts about *Gender & Diversity*, but these posts generated the highest level of engagement both on Facebook and on Instagram during the examined period. The followers not only commented on and liked the posts about the company committing itself to diversity but many of them also shared them. The conclusion can be drawn that these posts aroused many emotions. The significant number of negative comments confirms previous research findings on the reverse effect of posting about controversial issues (Berestova et al. 2022). However, the high number of comments also increased the organic reach of the post, which supported the company's awareness-raising campaign. In the case of YouTube, the campaign video about domestic violence reached the most views, while the two funny video advertisements promoting products made from recycled PET bottles generated the most engagement.

Community Support was the most dominant among the four sustainability dimensions; this includes most of the initiatives, raising awareness for environmental and social causes. There was only one Facebook post and one YouTube video where the company shared details about its sustainability strategy. Otherwise, awareness-raising and customer education were at the heart of its social media communication about sustainability.

Considering the fields of sustainability initiatives and the type of communication, we can conclude that IKEA's sustainability communication is engaging, drawing its followers' attention to various social and environmental topics. Besides informing them about corporate initiatives, they have also been encouraged to participate in the sustainability programmes by purchasing or reusing products or by committing themselves to social and environmental causes.

Table 4. Main sustainability initiatives based on Knoppe's theory

Field	Main areas
Environment & Product Sustainability	• Product range from recycled and recyclable materials • Air purifier, air quality sensor for a better indoor air quality • Reusable textile packaging instead of wrapping paper • Product safety: product recall • Free supply of spare parts
Gender & Diversity	• Awareness-raising for supporting diversity • A corporate programme focusing on equality, diversity, and inclusion
Community Support	• IKEA Festival – online event for more sustainable homes • Sustainability at IKEA (Circular Hub, second life of furniture) • Awareness-raising for Earth Hour, climate change, and switching off the lights • Awareness-raising for Earth Day, commitment to achieving sustainability goals by 2030 • 'Equal work-sharing at home' awareness-raising campaign • Domestic violence awareness-raising campaign • DIY tips for repurposing products • Cause-Related Marketing campaigns to support victims of domestic violence and LMBTQI NGO

Source: Social media accounts of IKEA Hungary

The answer to the first research question (R1) is that while the field of *Community Support* was the most relevant and popular in corporate social media communication, *Gender & Diversity* had the highest level of stakeholder engagement during the period under review. The social media posts introducing IKEA Hungary's initiatives around these topics generated many shares and positive and negative comments. Posting about controversial issues usually facilitates intensive customer engagement on social media.

Sustainability communication and engagement in social media

Out of the seventeen SDGs, IKEA highlighted five goals on its three social media accounts during the analysed period. These goals focus on the following topics (United Nations 2022):

- *SDG3 – Good health and well-being*: Healthy lives, well-being for everyone by reducing mortality, ending epidemics, preventing substance abuse, achieving universal health coverage, reducing the number of deaths and illnesses caused by hazardous chemicals or air, water, and soil pollution.
- *SDG5 – Gender equality*: Eliminating discrimination against women and all forms of violence against them, recognising unpaid care and domestic work, ensuring women's participation and equal opportunities for decision-making in politics, economics, and public life.
- *SDG10 – Reduced inequalities*: Achieving income growth of the bottom 40% of the population, the inclusion of all people, irrespective of age, sex, disability, race, ethnicity, origin, religion, or economic status, adopting policies to achieve greater equality, facilitating safe migration and mobility of people.
- *SDG12 – Responsible consumption and production*: Achieving the sustainable management and efficient use of natural resources, decreasing waste and food waste, environmentally sound management of chemicals and wastes, minimising negative impacts on human health and the environment, integrating sustainability information into corporate reports, applying sustainable public procurement practices.
- *SDG13 – Climate action*: Strengthening resilience to climate-related hazards and natural disasters, integrating climate change measures into policies and strategies, improving education and awareness-raising on climate change mitigation.

To answer the second research question (R2) the detailed distribution of SDGs on the three social media channels is shown in Table 5. The company's primary focus was responsible consumption and production, followed by gender equality. Climate action was only mentioned on Facebook, while reduced inequalities were featured on Facebook and YouTube. Corporate sustainability goals and achievements were detailed on the corporate website, and the social media channels have been dedicated rather to sustainability-related products, promotions, and awareness-raising initiatives.

Table 5. SDGs in social media communication of IKEA Hungary

	Social media channel		
SDG	**Facebook**	**Instagram**	**YouTube**
3 – Good health and well-being	3	4	1
5 – Gender equality	5	3	1
10 – Reduced inequalities	5	0	3
12 – Responsible consumption and production	8	2	5
13 – Climate action	2	0	0
Total	**23**	**9**	**10**

Source: Social media accounts of IKEA Hungary

Sustainability communication with the highest engagement

IKEA Hungary highlighted the importance of a more comfortable and greener home in one of its IKEA Festival YouTube live streams, as it can lead to better mental health. The other campaign about SDG3 (*Good health and well-being*) focused on indoor air quality by promoting its air purifier and air quality sensor. The Facebook posts about SDG3 topics generated altogether 835 likes, 137 comments and 39 shares, the Instagram posts received 127 thousand likes, while the IKEA Festival live stream had only 769 viewers on YouTube. The New Year's resolution Instagram post about preparing healthy food in sustainable food boxes was the most successful Instagram content of the company in the analysed period; almost 125 thousand followers liked it.

In the case of *Gender equality* (SDG5), the company started two noteworthy initiatives in 2021. The first campaign began in the spring of 2021 and raised awareness for more equal work-sharing at home. This goal was supported by a campaign video and a quiz-based game for couples to play on Instagram, named "Fifty-Fifty". The questions and the exciting insights displayed on Instagram Stories can help map their attitudes and feelings towards chores. The topics raised during the game support couples in discussing these questions at home and reaching an agreement, which benefits both parties. The more equal work-sharing campaign generated 349 likes, 143 comments, 12 shares on Facebook, and 1124 likes on Instagram.

The second awareness-raising campaign about domestic violence started in November 2021. Its main aim is to inform victims about their opportunities and support witnesses with a guide to helping victims. The educational Facebook video had 10,000 views, while the 3 posts generated 1,009 likes, 307 comments and 169 shares. The two Instagram posts received almost 18 thousand likes, while the YouTube video had 130 thousand views in the analysed period.

Social media communication about *Reduced inequalities* (SDG10) referred mainly to commitments to diversity and summarising a corporate programme to support diversity and the integration of migrants. IKEA also published a video podcast about this topic on YouTube to commemorate World Refugee Day. The Facebook video had 1,700 views, while the 3 YouTube videos had only 764 views. The 5 Facebook posts received 20.5 thousand likes, 4,100 comments and almost 1,000 people have shared them. The company's statement about supporting diversity as a reaction to a government decision received the highest number of likes in the analysed period. Altogether, 11 thousand followers showed their support this way.

Responsible consumption and production (SDG12) were the most frequent topics of the posts shared in the first 11 months of 2021. On Instagram, the company shared two posts with tips & tricks about repurposing or re-designing furniture and kitchenware instead of purchasing new items. The 3-day online event IKEA Festival for more sustainable homes had international and local programme elements, from experts' sharing their ideas about a more comfortable and sustainable home to entertaining music. The live broadcasts and their over 10 hour-long recordings had more than 60 thousand views on Facebook and only 1,500 on YouTube. Two Facebook posts were shared about reusable and recycled products, one about recalling a potentially dangerous product and another about the free supply of spare parts to extend the life of products, protect the environment, and save money. The eight Facebook posts generated 800 likes, 86 comments, and 33 shares, while the two Instagram posts with DIY ideas received 2,350 likes. The five YouTube videos (2 commercials, 2 festival live streams, and 1 podcast) had 52 thousand views. The most popular video was a commercial about a product that looks like sheepskin but it is actually made of reused PET bottles.

Although *Climate action* (SDG13) initiatives were detailed on the corporate website, the company shared only two Facebook posts mentioning the importance of tackling the climate change challenge. These posts generated 190 likes, 12 comments, and 11 shares.

Based on the analysis of stakeholder engagement in social media, the answer to the third research question (R3) can be formulated: of the several sustainability-related initiatives started in 2021, social media posts about *Reduced inequalities* (SDG10) generated the most engagement among stakeholders. This was a controversial topic which generated lots of emotions.

Tables 6, 7 and 8 highlight the most popular social media posts published by IKEA Hungary during the analysed period.

Table 6. The most popular Facebook posts published by IKEA Hungary

		Engagement		
Topic of the post	**SDG**	**No of likes**	**No of comments**	**No of shares**
Diversity (pride)	SDG10	11 000	1 300	393
Diversity IDAHOT	SDG10	5 500	2 100	436
Family is family	SDG10	2 300	284	135
Personality, not sexuality defines home	SDG10	947	321	13

Source: Facebook account of IKEA Hungary

Table 7. The most popular Instagram posts published by IKEA Hungary

Topic of the post	SDG	No of likes
New Year's resolution (healthy eating, sustainable food boxes)	SDG3	124 577
Campaign video against domestic violence	SDG5	17 336
Repurpose furniture instead of purchasing	SDG12	1 322

Source: Instagram account of IKEA Hungary

Table 8. The most popular YouTube videos published by IKEA Hungary

Topic of the post	SDG	No of views	No of reactions
Campaign video against domestic violence	SDG5	130 630	246
Better world starts at home (sheepskin from PET bottles)	SDG12	32 392	72
IKEA Festival live stream	SDG12	13 273	70
Better world starts at home (blanket from wood)	SDG12	5 426	90

Source: YouTube account of IKEA Hungary

Tables 6, 7 and 8 summarise the answer to the fourth research question (R4). It can be concluded that YouTube generated the most views due to its emotional messages, while Instagram performed well in terms of the number of likes, especially with inspirational content. The company placed most emphasis on Facebook in its sustainability communication, with most social media posts being published through this social media channel. IKEA Hungary succeeded in starting a dialogue on sustainability-related topics on Facebook, as evidenced by the high number of comments posted by stakeholders. The data shows that each social media channel has its own place in the communication mix; however, the specificities of each platform need to be considered when creating content.

Sustainability communication style

The tone of IKEA Hungary's sustainability communication on social media is direct, friendly, and engaging; they emphasise using plain language. This communication style fits well with the overall corporate communication strategy and is aligned with the core corporate values.

Based on the usual friendly and funny communication style, we could assume that the main aim of sustainability communication will be to entertain the social media followers. Nevertheless, the analysis of social media posts revealed that the communication strategy is colourful. Table 9 shows examples of content marketing tools implemented by the company.

Table 9. Content marketing matrix of IKEA Hungary

	Awareness	**Inspire**
Emotional	ENTERTAIN • Equal work-sharing at home survey & game • 'Blanket made from wood' spot	INSPIRE • IKEA Festival • DIY tips for repurposing products
Rational	EDUCATE • Video report about corporate programme focusing on equality, diversity, and inclusion • Sustainability podcasts	CONVINCE • Reusable Christmas gift bags • Air purifier for a better indoor air quality

Source: Social media accounts of IKEA Hungary

We can conclude that IKEA uses all four types of content marketing, using both emotional and rational argumentation, focusing on raising awareness among customers and inspiring them. For the social media posts with the highest stakeholder engagement, emotional argumentation was more effective than rational reasoning. However, the topics studied were very different and it is, therefore, difficult to answer the fifth research question (R5). To draw more robust conclusions, the content marketing strategies of several companies on different sustainability-related topics should be analysed. In the case of IKEA Hungary, it is worth highlighting that the style of communication on sustainability projects is aligned not only with the brand values but also with the topic and the communication objective. The company uses all four elements of the Content

Marketing Matrix in its content marketing strategy to select the one that best fits the message.

Based on the sustainability communication styles identified by the sustainability communications agency Lundquist, we can conclude that IKEA Hungary follows the "Narrators" strategy. The company has used both rational and emotional elements in its social media communication about sustainability; the posts are informative and engaging. While the social media posts containing emotional elements resulted in a higher level of stakeholder engagement, rational elements also have an important role in the content marketing strategy, as transparency can increase the level of trust.

The company clearly dominated the communication process; stakeholders were rarely invited to share their thoughts. While the stakeholder information strategy is well developed, IKEA could increase the level of engagement by utilising the opportunities provided by social media channels. Out of the three sustainability communication strategies introduced in the literature review, the stakeholder information strategy is the least engaging, while the stakeholder involvement strategy is based on intensive dialogue with stakeholders. To summarise the answer to the last research question (R6), the "Narrators" sustainability communication style and the stakeholder information strategy drive the highest stakeholder engagement.

Conclusions

The paper introduced content marketing as an effective response to customers' ad rejection and scepticism and promoted social media in corporate sustainability communication as a solution for two-way communication and stakeholder engagement.

The study aimed to examine the potential for implementing content marketing in sustainability communication, using the example of IKEA Hungary. The study combined two current corporate challenges: the effective reach of customers and communication about a very complex topic – sustainability – in an easy-to-understand and engaging way.

The wide range of topics and initiatives illustrate the complexity of sustainability communication. The fact that IKEA Hungary shares only some of its initiatives on social media shows that it is not its primary channel yet for sustainability communication. The analysed data allow us to conclude that the company's followers are open to sustainability messages.

The social media communication of IKEA Hungary was investigated to answer the defined research questions (R1-R6) on sustainability communication and stakeholder engagement. Out of the four sustainability fields identified by Knoppe (2015), most of the initiatives that the company launched concerned *Community Support*, with the highest stakeholder engagement in *Gender & Diversity*. Of the 17 SDGs, *Responsible consumption and production* (SDG12) stood out with the most social media posts. This is a significant domain, closely connected to the company's core business activities. *Reduced inequalities* (SDG10) generated the most engagement among stakeholders. It is a controversial topic, evoking a lot of emotions.

Of the three social media channels examined, YouTube generated the most views, Instagram the most likes, and Facebook the most comments. There is no single ideal platform for sustainability communication, so companies need to find the right platform for each piece of content.

IKEA Hungary uses all four types of content defined by the Content Marketing Matrix, using both rational and emotional argumentation, with the aim of raising awareness or inspiring its followers. The company's sustainability communication strategy is not only informative but also engaging, therefore it can be stated that it follows the strategy called "Narrators".

The social media content analysis shows that while the company is active in social media and presents the main sustainability initiatives to its followers, the level of engagement is low. Despite the informative and engaging communication style, the company mainly focuses on one-way communication in the field of sustainability. However, the company experiments with more engaging ideas, such as the "Fifty-Fifty" quiz-based game on Instagram Stories, which was created to raise awareness for more equal work-sharing at home. The stakeholders could be more empowered to make their voices heard since, at the moment, the company dominates communication on social media channels.

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