

Sustainability Communication of Nestlé on Twitter in the German and French Context

Clarissa Glück, Marie Steffens

Utrecht University

E-mail: clarissa.glueck@t-online.de, m.g.steffens@uu.nl

Abstract

This paper examines the differences in sustainability communication of the two Twitter profiles, Nestlé Germany and Nestlé France. The world's largest food company Nestlé is faced with the challenge of maintaining legitimacy towards international stakeholders through sustainability issues. The question arises whether the company is using the theory of cultural dimensions, which is widespread in management (Hofstede et al., 2010), in order to communicate sustainability in international markets in a target group-oriented manner. This also would be the case for the important European markets Germany and France. Additionally, the different classification of the two countries in the Food Sustainability Index 2019 raises the question of whether food sustainability is weighted differently in the two countries and whether communication about it is different.

Keywords: sustainability communication, Twitter, cultural dimensions

1. Introduction

Nestlé, the world's largest food company with 260.000 employees all around the world and 29 brands, has often faced extensive criticism concerning ecological and social exploitation. The allegations relate to immoral business with water, the destruction of the rainforest, pollution from plastic packaging and other issues of sustainability. Eckardt (2015), defines sustainability as “the establishment of sustainable and globally sustainable ways of living and doing business” (we translated, p. 5), which refers to economies that will not be detrimental to future generations. According to the Triple Bottom Line, sustainability includes the social component *People*, the ecological component *Planet* and the economic component *Profit* (Braccini & Margherita, 2019). All these three components have to be taken into account by companies in order to proceed in a fully sustainable way. The aspect of food sustainability is also relevant for the food company Nestlé. The *Food Life Cycle* involves the aspects of production, processing, packaging, distribution, consumption and waste (Baldwin, 2015). All these aspects include sustainability components that must be considered for a sustainable economy (*ibid.*). This comprehensive number of aspects must not only be integrated into the company's machinations in form of measurements, they must also be communicated to the stakeholders in an appropriate manner in order to ensure the legitimation of the company. Sustainability communication serves this purpose. With its hundreds of millions of users worldwide and the ability to disseminate information in real time (Twitter Fundamentals, 2020), Twitter offers Nestlé the opportunity to reach a wide range of stakeholders, including new and existing customers worldwide as well as to address investors, partners and existing or new employees. Therefore, Twitter offers an optimal tool for the dissemination of sustainability communication among various relevant target groups and represents the communication platform of this study through which Nestlé communicates about sustainability within different cultural contexts. According to Hofstede et al. (2010),

national cultures can be clustered in different dimensions. The heart of every culture are the values that are gradually acquired and internalized from birth and form the starting point of every action (Hofstede et al., 2010). In their five cultural dimensions, namely power distance, uncertainty avoidance, masculinity vs. femininity, individualism vs. collectivism and long-term vs. short-term orientation, Germany is defined as less power-distant, more masculine, less uncertainty avoidant and more short-term oriented than France. Both countries don't differ a lot in the dimension of being highly individualist (Hofstede et al., 2010). Although the cultural dimensions have often been criticized of being generalising and essentialistic, they are listed among the most widespread cultural theories in international management, what made them relevant for this research.

2. Problem definition and Research Questions

As a global player, Nestlé is known worldwide for poor reputations regarding sustainability. To maintain its legitimacy towards international stakeholders, the company has to communicate sustainability measures and responsibility in a way that is appropriate for the target group, including the two major European markets Germany and France. According to the understanding of Hofstede et al. (2010), Nestlé must first become familiar with the peculiarities of cultures in order to report on sustainability in an appropriate and target-group-oriented manner. Indeed, the company has separate communication platforms on a country-by-country basis, indicating that communication differs from country to country and also between Germany and France. The question is, to what extent the differences in country-specific communication can be seen on the two Twitter profiles Nestlé Germany and Nestlé France and to what extent the cultural dimensions can be found in sustainability communication about ecological, social and economic topics and thus be used as an explanation for differences. Since France ranks first in the Food Sustainability Index 2019, and is ahead of Germany in this aspect, it can be assumed that especially

the communication about Food Sustainability differs between the countries because the importance is different. Against this background, the following research questions arose:

How does Nestlé's sustainability communication on Twitter differ in the German and French context?

→ What general differences can be identified in the sustainability communication between Nestlé Germany and Nestlé France?

→ To what extent can the country-specific differences in sustainability communication be determined using the cultural dimensions of Hofstede et al. (2010)?

→ What are the specific differences in communication about food sustainability between Nestlé France and Nestlé Germany?

3. Methodology

A comparative corpus analysis was used as a method. The corpus was defined by all publications on the German and French Nestlé twitter profiles, that have been published between 1st January 2019 and 31th March 2019. These tweets and retweets form the examination units. The investigation period was chosen since it was assumed that new communication approaches would also be implemented at the beginning of a new financial year. Twitter was defined as the investigation channel because of the characteristics of being a publication medium that

data were examined for formal characteristics. Was it a tweet or a retweet? In case of retweets, from which profiles were they copied? Were quotes and reference used? Formal categories were formed from these characteristics. In a second step, the data were finally examined with regard to content and sustainability features and sorted into first content categories, which were further supplemented by multiple subsequent inductive-deductive recoding. The entire coding process was done by one single coder, Clarissa Glück. The content category determination was characterized by the application of the sustainability theory by searching for features of the *Triple Bottom Line*, the theory of food sustainability by searching for features of the *Food Life Cycle* as well as by own inductive category determination. A pretest was then used to test for validity and reliability, and to improve the selectivity of the categories. The final measuring instrument enabled examination on the macro level (what is the general weighting of the sustainability aspects *People, Planet, Profit?*), enabled on a micro level a detailed examination of individual sustainability issues and features of the communication concerning food sustainability. To consider the sustainability communication on the macro level, the three higher-ranking categories were deductively derived from theory of the *Triple Bottom Line*: *People* includes all tweets and retweets that address topics related to social welfare,

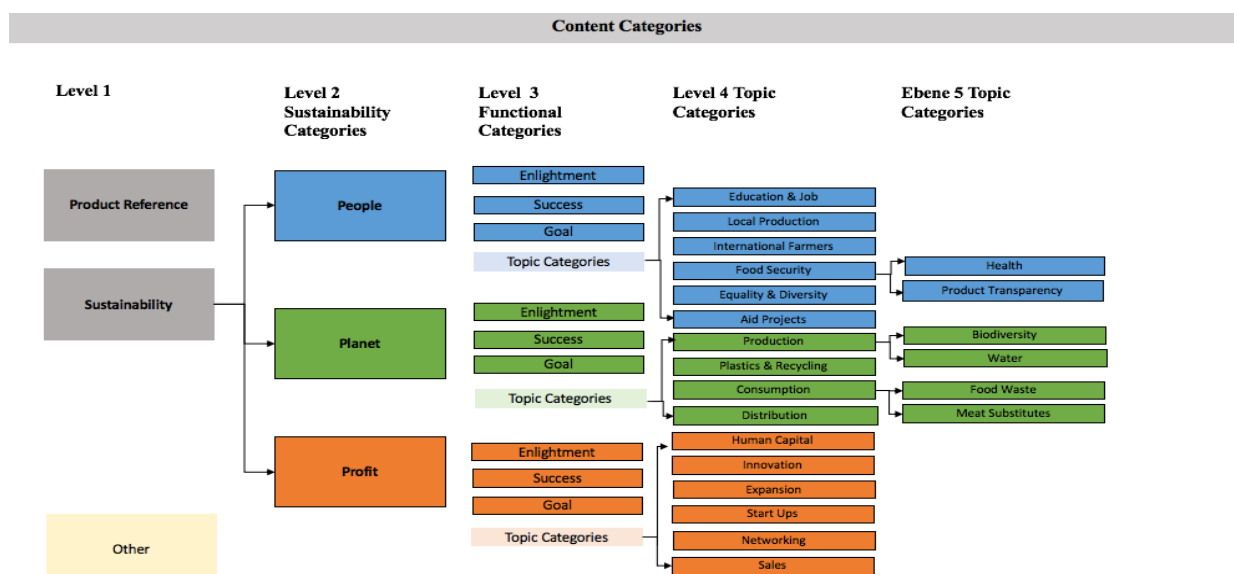


Figure 1: Content Categories

is independent of time and place and which appeals to a wide variety of stakeholders. Additionally, a first overview showed that almost every publication on the both Nestlé Twitter profiles were about a sustainability issue. This fact made the medium particularly relevant as it proved its importance in terms of sustainability communication. The status of the tweets was the 18th February 2020. The measuring instrument, on the basis of which the counting of individual categories should take place, was developed by using a deductive-inductive method. In a first step, the

education, justice, social resources, health and quality of life. *Planet* addresses all topics related to natural resources, water, biodiversity, the strike to keep oceans and environment clean or refer to sustainable agriculture. Finally, *Profit* includes all tweets and retweets that deal with economic sustainability, for example by addressing the training of future workers, recruiting processes, the maintenance of economic strength and the measures to increase it. Based on the above-mentioned sustainability categories, functional subcategories (level 3 categories)

and topic categories (level 4 and 5 categories) were created afterwards. Some of these categories were identified inductively through the careful examination of the corpus, regardless from existing source material. Some other subordinated topic categories base deductively on mentioned sustainability categories and were taken over after a usability check on the corpus. One important content category that was created inductively is *Product reference*. This category provides information on whether the publication of a sustainability communication is directly or indirectly promoting a Nestlé product. It was included in order to examine more about the intention of the tweet. The category *Other* was built to include all remaining tweets without any sustainability content. After the identification of the usable categories, topic clusters were built and the category system created. The detailed hierarchical structure of the measuring instrument should make it possible to distance oneself from an essentialist view and to avoid a too superficial examination for differences (see Figure 1).

3.1. Formulation of Hypothesis

On the basis of the cultural dimensions (Hofstede et al., 2010), hypotheses were independently formulated, applying the characteristics of France and Germany to sustainability communication, which should be tested for falsification in the empirical part of the research. These hypotheses were thus used to answer the formulated research questions. The hypotheses are covered by self-defined indicators in the form of categories of the measuring instrument. It was assumed that, if Nestlé used the theory of cultural dimensions in the manner how sustainability is communicated on the French and German Twitter profiles, the following hypotheses would stand up to a falsification attempt and that the indicators would show significant differences between Nestlé France and Nestlé Germany:

- **H1 – dimension “power distance”:** Nestlé France's sustainability communication is more focused, while Nestlé Germany takes diversity more into account. This is evident both in terms of the published sustainability issues and in formal terms.

A higher number of retweets and references indicate power distance. These are indicators of centralized communication, since Nestlé itself and some media as power entities would be the focus of communication.

In contrast to this, a more diverse use of sources, through the more frequent publication of retweets represent a low power distance, as this would indicate less centralized communication.

- **H2 – dimension “power distance”:** Nestlé Germany's sustainability communication focuses more on social equality and diversity than in the case of Nestlé France.

The category *Equality & Diversity* serves as an indicator in this case. A significantly more frequent theming would therefore speak in favor of lower power distance.

- **H3 – dimension “uncertainty avoidance”:** Nestlé France's sustainability communication shows a tendency to avoid uncertainty by avoiding

communication about the unknown, while Nestlé Germany shows a tendency towards greater willingness to innovate through showing openness to new things.

Food safety, health and *product transparency* as well as *local production* are indicators of uncertainty avoidance, since they ensure transparency and address customer fears. On the other hand, indicators for a low level of uncertainty avoidance are *education*, as this provides information about existing problems and thus more likely to trigger uncertainties, as well as the categories *innovation, start-ups* and *expansion*, as these indicate openness for the unknown.

- **H4 – dimension “masculinity vs. femininity”:** Nestlé France's sustainability communication is more based on empathy and compassion for the social and environmental circumstances, while Nestlé Germany focuses more on communicating long-term company growth.

Categories for masculinity are *profit, expansion, turnover, innovation* and *human capital*. These go hand in hand with economic growth. A more frequent *product reference* indicates a masculine orientation as well as this should stimulate consumption. On the other hand, femininity would show itself through a more extensive approach to topics related to solidarity and empathy. This includes the categories *planet* and *people in general, aid projects* and *international farmers*.

- **H5 – dimension “individualism”:** Both, Nestlé France and Nestlé Germany highlight issues in social sustainability communication that affect the well-being of individuals, the customers. Collective topics are comparatively less addressed.

Health, product transparency and *food safety* indicate individualism, as well as *education & job*. The well-being of individuals is in the focus of communication. The category *international farmers* relates to the support of *small farmers* through fair production methods. *Aid projects*, refers to the support of people in need in developing countries. These are indicators of collectivism, since the wellbeing of society is in the foreground.

- **H6 – dimension “long-term orientation vs. short-term orientation”:** Nestlé France's sustainability communications is increasingly geared towards long-term engagement, while Nestlé Germany places greater emphasis on speed and communicating solutions.

Categories for short-term orientation are *successes* and *goals* as they stand for quick solutions. A generally more frequent discussion of *profit* and *sales* and a higher number of *product references* would also be indicators for short-term orientation. In contrast, categories for long-term orientation are *planet*, which addresses long-term commitment, such as *biodiversity, water* and *plastic & recycling*.

Regarding the differences in the communication about food sustainability between the countries, following hypothesis was added:

- **H7:** Nestlé France reports more comprehensively on the aspects of food sustainability in comparison to other sustainability topics as well as in

comparison to Nestlé Germany's sustainability communication.

Categories for food sustainability are *local production*, *food safety*, production, *plastic & recycling*, *consumption* and *distribution*. These correspond to aspects of the Food Life Cycle, which defines food sustainability.

3.2. Performing the counting

The categories and thus the indicators for the hypotheses were always counted per tweet or retweet, i.e. always the entire publication, including the posting text, image or video and any links. Through the examination of Twitter content and thus computer-mediated communication it was not sure if the data could be called up indefinitely, so all the tweets were copied into a Word document. This ensured that the content was permanently available. Each examination unit was counted as often as categories could be found in it, i.e. separately for each identified category. In order to ensure the accuracy and selectivity of the categories and to be able to clearly assign the short messages, the coding had to be carried out several times and constantly refined. A clear definition of the categories and anchor examples made the assignment possible. These measures were necessary because of the high range of diverse content and thus indispensable for an effective counting. Since each examination unit had characteristics from several categories and could therefore be counted several times, percentage values for the coverage of each category were determined because the first examination was based on percentage coverage. When considering the percentage coverage, the hierarchy of the categories was taken into account in order to gain an insight into the thematic distribution at lower and higher levels. The differences and tendencies identified in these steps concerning the indicators of the hypotheses were checked for significance in the next step by making use of the Chi²-Test via the statistic program SPSS. A subsequent test for correlation for some of the categories by considering the Phi-coefficient should provide insights into the actual relationship between the indicators.

4. Results

First of all, it was striking that Nestlé France published 298 tweets which is more than twice as many research units in the relevant period on Twitter than at the Nestlé Germany profile. Here 132 Sustainability tweets were published. Since in both countries, almost all publications addressed at least one aspect of sustainability, one can speculate about a higher urgency with regard to sustainability communication in France. At the higher level, *People*, *Planet*, *Profit*, clear trends could be identified that differ between the countries. Nestlé Germany communicates more about economic aspects of sustainability, while Nestlé France reports more about nature and people. The subject of plastic in particular is of central relevance at Nestlé France's Twitter communication, whereas Nestlé Germany communicates a lot about supporting startups – a topic that doesn't even exist in the French communication. The following results can be summarized in relation to the

hypotheses about the cultural dimensions: The results on the cultural dimension of power distance (Hofstede et al.,

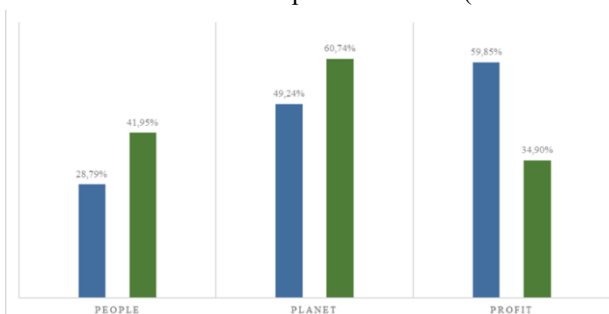


Figure 2: Thematic weighting of sustainability communication for France (Green) and Germany (Blue)

2010) show a tendency that is opposed to the assuming on the basis of the authors' country classification. Germany reports more centralized than France by using more tweets than retweets. Because Nestlé Germany quotes and references significantly more, sustainability communication is more diverse in this aspect, however, indicators about the origin of these references and citations could not be confirmed. Overall, Nestlé's cross-border sustainability communication is therefore not associated with any clear characteristics for different power distances. However, with regard to the cultural dimension of uncertainty avoidance, many indicators could be confirmed. Categories that were defined as indicators for openness to new and thus for low uncertainty avoidance were found significantly more within the communication of Nestlé Germany, while Nestlé France communicated significantly more about the categories that stand for uncertainty avoidance. Thus, the hypothesis that Nestlé France shows more signs of uncertainty avoidance and that Nestlé Germany shows greater willingness to take risks could largely be confirmed by the ways how they communicated sustainability.

Concerning the dimension of masculinity vs. femininity, categories for economic sustainability and thus indicators for masculinity could actually be proven to appear more frequently at the communication of Nestlé Germany. Moreover, a product reference was used more often, which was also seen as an indicator of masculinity. At the same time, however, there is an ambivalence because Nestlé Germany also showed some indicators for femininity more frequently, such as the communication about aid projects and international farmers. Other indicators are more often addressed by Nestlé France. Therefore, the results can only identify some tendencies in terms of masculinity and femininity, whereas the hypothesis cannot be confirmed in general.

Regarding the dimension of individualism, the individualistic orientation of both countries is not reflected in sustainability communication, at least not with the help of the defined indicators. Although a few of the indicators for individualism are actually more common in the communication of both countries than indicators for collectivism, the other way around is also the case and

some of the indicators for collectivism have been counted more often. Also, no uniformity between the countries could be identified which, according to Hofstede et al., 2010, can both be assigned to individualism. Thus, the hypothesis cannot be confirmed.

Looking at the fifth cultural dimension, again only partial aspects of the indicators for both, long-term and short-term orientation, could be confirmed. Some others again indicated actually an opposite effect than expected by the hypothesis. While Nestlé France indeed tends to address more frequently environmental issues that involve a long-term commitment, the indicators that should confirm that Nestlé Germany highlights faster solutions by communicating successes and short-term goals, could not be confirmed.

The results of the Food Sustainability hypothesis partially reflect the results of how the two countries are listed in the Food Sustainability Index, however, it couldn't be confirmed that Nestlé France generally reports in more detail about all food sustainability indicators. Nestlé Germany communicates a lot about meat substitutes and thus especially highlights the consumption aspect. This reflects also the tendency towards a greater willingness to innovate and the stronger weighting of economic sustainability. In turn, Nestlé France's communication on food sustainability includes indicators that stand for uncertainty avoidance namely food security, consisting of the aspects *health* and *product transparency* as well as local production.

5. Conclusion

The results give insights into the sustainability communication of Nestlé via computer-mediated communication. As the results are based on tweets as one whole examination unit, future research should have a closer look on the usage of hashtags and single keywords. This would allow a more detailed insight in how sustainability communication is implemented via Twitter, whereas this research gives an overview of the thematic weighting. Twitter provides also huge potential by anchoring news through the usage of external links. Due to their size, these links could not be included in the present investigation, but they offer further information, while the tweets themselves, with their word limit, are only kept very concise. Of course, this conciseness also has an impact on the informative value, especially when applied on the complexity of culture, and thus also on the results. Future research should thus extend the focus on further information anchors, provided within the tweets. In addition, the huge difference in the number of published tweets between the two countries raises the question whether this could be due to different communication strategies in general. For example, the level of popularity and reach potential of Twitter in France and Germany could play a role. Therefore, it would be interesting if future research takes differences of general communication strategies of France and Germany into account, for example by examining the activation date of Twitter and the total amount of tweets, followers and interactions in both

countries.

Moreover, the results show that just as culture is deeply rooted in a social group, it is also multi-layered, complex and dynamic and difficult to break down to five dimensions. Although tendencies towards differences between Nestlé France and Nestlé Germany can be recognized and the hypothesis of large and small uncertainty avoidance in sustainability communication was largely confirmed, the results of the other hypotheses do not lead to any clear generalizations about a possible classification of the two countries in the cultural dimensions. Nevertheless, the identified trends offer an approach for future research in this area. For example, Nestlé Germany seems to be communicating more about economic sustainability, integrating more product relevance and addressing innovation and corporate sustainability, while Nestlé France prefers social and environmental issues and places greater emphasis on food security and local origins. Absolute truths are not formulated, because various influences can play a role here. Nevertheless, the results could encourage a global player like Nestlé to think about a new direction towards networked, international sustainability management, which would certainly help to promote global awareness of global issues, to stimulate socially responsible behavior in relation to sustainability, and incidentally, to deepen the trust of the stakeholders with comprehensive, integrating sustainability communication.

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