Article

Digital Communication of Conscientious Brands: Case Studies

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Abstract: In the actual context, it is increasingly crucial for brands to act with a conscience and communicate their environmental and social commitments to gain social legitimacy from stakeholders. Despite the relevance of this issue, limited studies provide insight into conscientious communication. Specifically, there is a dearth of research in the conscientious brand literature on how conscience-driven brands can communicate in digital environments. Indeed, brands may benefit from digital touchpoints by increasing social acceptance. The proposed paper aims to provide a conscientious communication definition and explore requirements that conscientious brands can fulfil to communicate their conscientiousness to stakeholders in the online context. The findings emerging from secondary data-based case studies offer a preliminary definition of conscientious communication and initial answers to what conscientious brands communicate (main contents), to whom (main audience), for what objectives (functions), how (main principles) and where (main digital means and channels) they communicate. Furthermore, the paper provides a compass to orient managers and practitioners toward conscientious communication strategies and practices to achieve environmental, social, and governance goals. This study broadens the debate on conscientious brands and offers theoretical insights into social legitimacy. Finally, it paves the way for future research in this emerging field.

Keywords: conscientious brands; conscientious communication; digital communication; social and environmental projects

1. Introduction

In the current context, brands are increasingly required to adopt a sustainable approach and use conscience as a guide to their management decisions. Being conscientious is not only about awareness of self-identity and actions [1] but also about understanding organisations' obligation to act morally towards others [2].

Ind and Iglesias [3] argue that the consciousness of organisations and their brand is revealed in building a profitable business while addressing some of the global challenges, such as climate change and growing inequalities between countries and within societies.

In response to stakeholders' increasingly high ethical and social expectations of organisations, the need to move toward real change in brand management approaches is now emerging [2]. There is a pressing need for brands to take more responsibility and contribute to the development of a better world [4].

Therefore, research has been directed toward considering a conscientious brand management approach and the concept of conscientious brands [5,6]. The emerging theory of conscientious brand management implies that the brand acts according to the moral principles outlined in its brand purpose and core values by placing the interests of humanity above mere profit [2–6].

The challenge for brands that adopt a conscientious approach is to demonstrate their authentic commitment and performance toward environmental, social, and governance goals (ESG) in order to establish a conscientious and credible brand image in the minds of

stakeholders [6,7]. Indeed, stakeholders demand that companies justify and account not only for their economic actions but also for their environmental and social behaviour [8].

The pursuit of this goal requires effective communication. Therefore, recent research on conscientious brands places corporate sustainability communication at the core of conscientious brands [6]. Sustainable communication has acquired increasing importance as a means of legitimising corporate activity in the eyes of stakeholders [9,10]. Particularly in digital contexts, environmental and social disclosure provides an opportunity for organisations to increase social consensus [11].

However, authors have identified that too many brands use sustainable communication to accomplish opportunistic goals (e.g., enhancing a damaged reputation or improving a company's competitive position) or deceptively, incurring greenwashing practices [12,13]. Greenwashing occurs whenever there is no full correspondence between sustainability communication and sustainability actions [12]. This phenomenon has caused a legitimacy crisis [14], undermined the credibility of brand communication, and resulted in distrust and disillusionment among stakeholders [13].

Despite these issues, few studies have examined the factors that brands should consider when authentically communicating their social and environmental commitments to their stakeholders [3], especially in the digital context. As recommended by Markovic, Iglesias, and Ind [15], more research should be conducted to explore and understand how conscientious brands can communicate their identity and, at the same time, influence their stakeholders to become more conscientious.

Specifically, limited are the studies that provide a comprehensive view of the definition and requirements of conscientious brand communication. Indeed, conscientious communication is almost defined in the literature in connection with the B2B perspective [16,17]. There is a dearth of research in the branding literature on how conscientious brands communicate in digital environments.

In line with the multiple underlying gaps, the aim of this research is to explore the digital disclosure of conscientious brands and provide a deeper understanding of possible strategies and practices of authentic brand communication of consciousness in a digital context. In particular, the paper seeks to provide initial answers to the following research questions: what is meant by conscientious communication; what its focus is; to whom it is addressed; what its main functions are; how, and with what means and channels, it is developed.

Through a case study methodology [18], this paper explores the communication strategies and practices online of three brands: The Body Shop International, Danone North America, and Seventh Generation. The brands selected are B corporations (or B Corps) recognised as companies with sustainability in their DNA [3,19,20].

The B Corps are for-profit companies with high standards of social and environmental performance, transparency, and accountability. Certified B Corp™ companies have become part of a global movement known as the B Global Network, which shares a collective vision of an inclusive, equitable, and regenerative economy for all people and the planet [21].

Taking into consideration the digital communication of these three B Corporations, the paper seeks to enrich the debate on conscientious brands and provide theoretical insights into conscientious communication, stimulating future research in this emerging academic field. In particular, the paper first contributes to a definition of conscientious communication and defines some of its key requirements considering the digital environment. Secondly, it provides further insights into the area of legitimacy theory, as it supports the belief that communication is a tool for achieving social consensus [10,11]. Finally, it will provide managerial insights into conscience-driven brand communication. In detail, it will offer managers and practitioners a compass for conscientious communication. This compass is a first attempt to formalise and answer some unanswered questions, which will emerge as results of the case study.

The paper's remainder is as follows. Section 2 contains the conceptual background of the present research. Section 3 introduces the case study methodology and presents the case

studies, followed by Section 4 with a discussion and Section 5 with practical implications. Finally, in Section 6, there are limitations and future research of the present work.

2. Conceptual Background

2.1. Conscientious Brand

In recent years, brand management literature has increasingly focused on conscientious branding [2,3,5,6].

The authors who first used the term consider that conscientious branding may be developed by considering environmental concerns and ethics as the main dimensions of the corporate brand [5]. At the same time, authors such as Olsen and Peretz [22] have associated the concept of conscientious branding with Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR). A brand can be said to be conscientious when it makes a long-term commitment to social responsibility activities and has a positive impact on stakeholders.

According to Ind and Iglesias [3], the concept of conscientious brand is conceived as an alternative to corporate social responsibility as a passively adopted practice by brands, decentralising its management and execution within the organisation [13]. Consequently, it paves the way for a new brand management logic that is driven by a strong sense of moral responsibility and deeply integrates CSR into the corporate culture. A brand driven by conscience, indeed, should be "[...] perceived by stakeholders to prioritise ethical leadership and co-creation across all value-chain related activities in ways that contribute to social and environmental sustainability" [6] (p. 2).

This definition calls for ethics, morality, and sustainability (environmental, social, and economic) to be a central component of the organisation's consciousness, which is enhanced throughout the value chain [6]. It is in accordance with the view of sustainability as a concept that encompasses other concepts, such as CSR, ESG, and Socially Responsible Investment (SRI), which are driving forces for achieving the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) [23,24].

The field of conscientious brand research is relatively new, and there are numerous gaps in its development [2,15]. Several contributions to the relevant literature have examined brands of organisations operating in B2B from different perspectives [15].

Several studies have examined leadership as a means of constructing a conscientious identity [25], the diffusion of conscientiousness through partnerships [13,17], activism, and the social impact of conscientious action [16]. For example, Iglesias et al. [13] examine how a conscientious brand is constructed in collaboration with business partners through the Unilever case. In their study, the authors suggest that brands should consider brand purpose and co-creation as key factors.

In the conscientious brand literature, brand purpose has become fundamental in management practice [26]. Brand purpose is an expression of internal brand consciousness, understood as a moral compass [27], which directs corporate strategies in promoting transformative change in the world. This intent becomes the brand's reason for existence [2,3,16].

Therefore, in formulating a brand purpose, the organisation should consider both the social, environmental, and economic challenges (e.g., climate change, environmental pollution, unemployment, poverty, etc.) and the expectations of stakeholders. To this end, it becomes crucial to promote higher stakeholder involvement in the co-creation of brand purpose [28].

In this context, communication has become more and more critical to fostering alignment in the brand vision, communicating the brand purpose, and stimulating active stakeholder participation in issues of importance to the brand [3,15]. It is also important for brands that adopt a conscientious approach to demonstrate their genuine commitment to people's well-being and the preservation of the planet. The main objective is to establish credibility with stakeholders [7] and avoid incurring reputational risks associated with greenwashing or woke-washing practices [3,12]. These occur, in particular, when brands undertake initiatives and create communications that suggest a commitment beyond what is actually accomplished [3].

Instead, according to Abratt et al. [6], sustainable communication is an essential element in building brand awareness in B2B. Despite its importance, communication is discussed less and in a fragmented manner in the literature [15]. The literature on conscientious branding is also, as far as is known, silent on the role of digital communication.

These issues and gaps are discussed in more detail in the following sections.

2.2. Sustainable Communication in Conscientious Brand

According to a recent study, sustainability communication is essential for building conscientious brands [6]. Sustainability communication encompasses the dimensions of environmental, social, and economic communication and is essential for a company to gain social legitimacy [29,30].

Legitimacy theories suggest that to understand and meet the demands and expectations of all stakeholders, companies should not only be socially responsible but also authentically project and signal their commitment to sustainability [30,31]. Indeed, the development of effective communication practices and an ongoing dialogue with stakeholders improves mutual understanding and reduces the risks that may be generated by public criticism [32].

Sustainability communication is also likely to have positive effects on reputation and loyalty, derived from the enhanced social legitimacy it generates [33]. Thus, the adoption and communication of the organisation's sustainable behaviour is crucial to stabilising a sustainable brand image and gaining social acceptance from stakeholders [34].

To gain legitimacy, corporate sustainability communication should primarily inform stakeholders about the organisation's sustainability commitments and activities in relation to ESG objectives and demonstrate the organisation's actual efforts [35,36]. These functions emphasise the need to accurately and comprehensively inform and report on the brand's actual activities [36]. Disseminating concrete commitments and achievements through effective sustainability communication can differentiate companies [37], as it conveys authenticity and conscientiousness.

Research on conscientious brands highlights the importance of sustainable communication, particularly in building relationships with business partners [17] and employees [6]. In accordance with these studies, a conscientious brand should be able to guide and communicate the purpose of the brand, its strategic goals, and the results achieved to its employees and partners. In other words, communication should promote alignment with the brand purpose and brand values, as well as promote inclusive processes aimed at empowering employees and business partners to influence corporate decision-making [38].

In the literature on conscientious branding, the concept of sustainable communication has been accompanied by the concept of conscientious communication [3,16,17]. The term appears in Beitelspacher and Getchell [17] (p. 225), who define conscientious communication as "pro-social, task and context appropriate, and situated within the broader external communication factors (i.e., relationship, culture, practice) of the B2B organisational relationship". In addition, conscientious communication emerges in Kapitan et al. [16], who define it as a key accelerator for the building of a common purpose with social impact.

The book by Ind and Iglesias [3] is the only contribution that discusses conscientious communication from a broader perspective. Specifically, the authors argue that conscientious communication should present an honest picture of a company and its commitment to environmental and social issues. Moreover, it is not just about telling the world about a company's successes but about inspiring and persuading others to contribute to a problem. Accordingly, conscientious communication should aim to inspire employees and partners, as well as consumers, to behave as good citizens by awakening ethical and moral consciences [3].

However, no clear definition of conscientious branding is given. Therefore, the concept of conscientious communication remains vague, fragmented, and almost limited to the B2B context. Furthermore, despite the importance of sustainable communication in the

digital sphere in recent years [39], there are no references in the literature that consider how conscientious brands can communicate in the online context.

Given this gap, the proposed paper will delve into the literature on sustainability in digital environments to identify possible insights that can be extended in conscientious brand communication.

2.3. Sustainable Communication in the Digital Environment

Morsing and Schultz [40] suggest that communication between companies and stakeholders cannot be purely informative. To increase companies' legitimacy and stakeholder awareness in their sustainability efforts, there needs to be two-way communication between the organisation and the stakeholders [40,41].

New technologies and the Internet have contributed to a progressive shift towards more interactive and engaging sustainability communication [42]. The growth and spread of digital environments have enabled organisations to develop more comprehensive and innovative strategies for communicating sustainability. Indeed, digital communication has become a "key relational driver" that integrates sustainability communication and provides an effective channel for engaging and informing stakeholders about sustainability initiatives [42].

Corporate websites, in particular, have gradually become a privileged channel for disseminating corporate sustainability content and interacting with stakeholders [43]. By using this communication tool, organisations are not only able to provide accurate information to their stakeholders but also to implement participatory mechanisms based on active dialogue with them [40,43].

In addition to corporate websites, in the Web 2.0 era, social media has provided companies with new communication channels to connect with their stakeholders. Given the power of social media to generate public interest, an increasing number of companies have adopted these platforms in their sustainability communications [30,44]. Social networks (e.g., Twitter, Facebook, LinkedIn, etc.), in particular, have great potential for brands, as they can be used to share information about sustainable initiatives in a more informal way and enable ongoing dialogue and interaction with stakeholders [45]. Dialogue-based processes enable companies to understand stakeholders' expectations regarding sustainability and allow stakeholders to have an overview of the company's commitment [46].

Thus, for conscientious brands, digital communication and its tools can be an important opportunity to gain social acceptance and project conscientiousness to stakeholders. Therefore, starting from an evident gap in the reference literature on digital communication, it would be interesting to explore the communication of conscientious brands by formalising strategies and practices that consider the digital environment.

3. Data and Methods

3.1. Case Study Methodology

To address the novelty of the concept of conscientious communication and the lack of an established theoretical framework, the proposed concept paper proposes an exploration of three case studies [18,47].

Case studies are recommended when there is a need to generate theoretical insights from a lack of knowledge of a phenomenon [48]. This method is common in the social sciences and is useful in demonstrating what has been accomplished in practice by invoking the superiority of some organisational practices over others. Additionally, using observation of practice is a method for testing or building theories [49].

The present research is based on the belief that case studies can facilitate the development of initial theoretical insights based on the observation of best practices for future theory development in the field of conscientious brand communication in the digital environment. The purpose of the case studies conducted in this research is to describe and highlight some of the key requirements for conscientious online communication, considering communication practices and strategies adopted by brands recognised as conscientious.

Even though a case study has a flexible research design [47], it is imperative to establish and adhere to a rigorous procedure [50]. In a case study research design, the steps of defining and selecting a case, collecting and analysing data, and communicating the results are crucial [51]. The procedure used in this paper is illustrated in Figure 1.
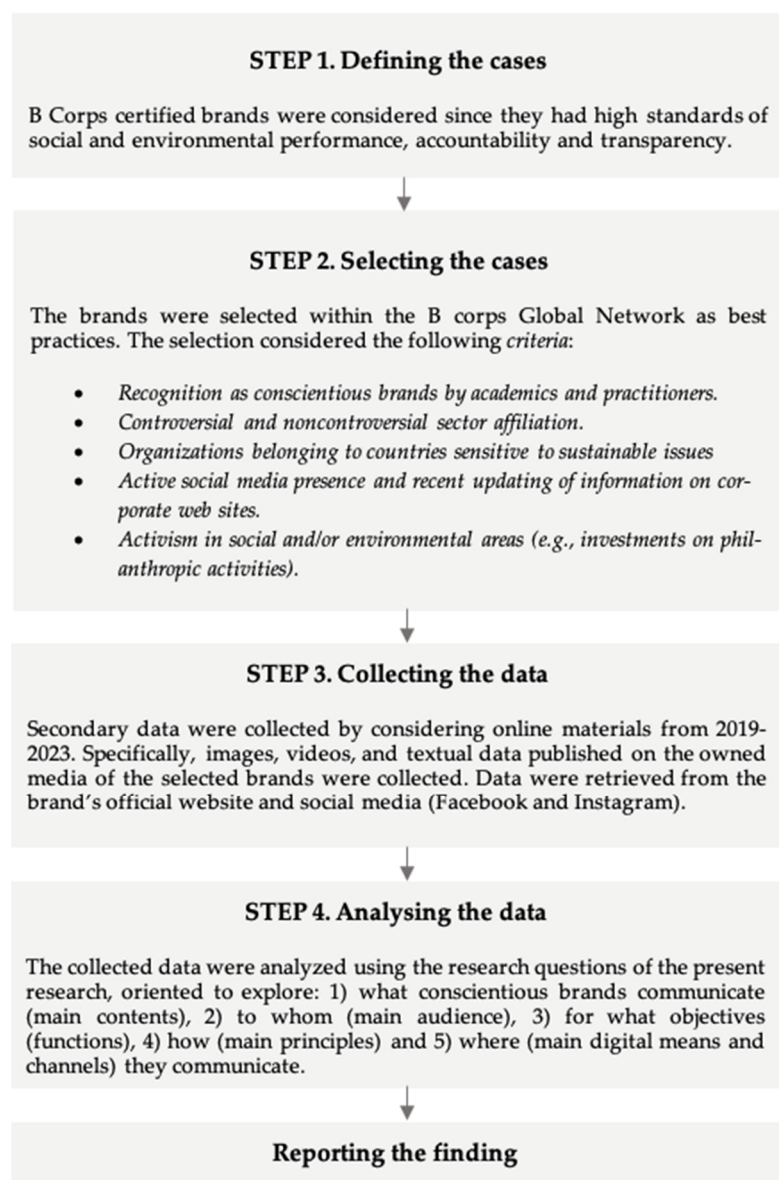

STEP 1. Defining the cases

B Corps certified brands were considered since they had high standards of social and environmental performance, accountability and transparency.

STEP 2. Selecting the cases

The brands were selected within the B corps Global Network as best practices. The selection considered the following *criteria*:

- *Recognition as conscientious brands by academics and practitioners.*
- *Controversial and noncontroversial sector affiliation.*
- *Organizations belonging to countries sensitive to sustainable issues*
- *Active social media presence and recent updating of information on corporate web sites.*
- *Activism in social and/or environmental areas (e.g., investments on philanthropic activities).*

STEP 3. Collecting the data

Secondary data were collected by considering online materials from 2019-2023. Specifically, images, videos, and textual data published on the owned media of the selected brands were collected. Data were retrieved from the brand's official website and social media (Facebook and Instagram).

STEP 4. Analysing the data

The collected data were analyzed using the research questions of the present research, oriented to explore: 1) what conscientious brands communicate (main contents), 2) to whom (main audience), 3) for what objectives (functions), 4) how (main principles) and 5) where (main digital means and channels) they communicate.

Reporting the finding

Figure 1. Case studies procedure. Source: ns elaboration.

Step 1. Defining the cases

The definition of case studies to be taken as examples of best practices started from the list of B Corps Global Network drawn up by B Lab and updated to the year 2023 (step 1) [21]. B Lab is a non-profit organisation becoming known for certifying B Corporations. B Corp™ certification designates that a company meets high standards of verified performance, accountability and transparency on factors ranging from employee benefits and charitable donations to supply chain practices and sourcing materials [21].

A conscientious approach to business is evident in B Corporations, which constantly strive for an inclusive, equitable, and regenerative economic paradigm that goes beyond profits [52]. Therefore, considering these organisations provides value to the selection of

cases and makes it possible to answer the research questions put forward in this paper, which aim to explore an authentic and genuine type of communication.

To obtain certification, in fact, a company should demonstrate high social and environmental performance assessed through the B Impact Assessment (BIA), a tool developed by B Lab that measures the positive impact performance of organisations on different stakeholders: the environment, communities, customers, suppliers, employees, and shareholders. The BIA assigns an overall score by summing up the partial scores obtained from the performance assessment in relation to each stakeholder group considered [21]. The purpose of this type of assessment is to identify the areas of greatest interest to brands and those stakeholders privileged in the definition of sustainable goals [53].

Step 2. Selecting the cases

In the process of case study selection, five criteria were considered.

The *first selection criterion* was whether the brands were recognised as conscientious by reputable sources. Among the multiple brands adhering to the B Corps movement, it was decided to select brands that were among the most cited conscientious brands by academics and practitioners. Meanwhile, brands that have already been extensively discussed in the academic literature (such as Patagonia) were excluded from the selection in order to ensure the originality of the present work.

As a *second criterion,* it was decided to select brands from companies within a controversial sector as well as brands from organisations within a non-controversial sector to enhance the transversality of the study. The decision to select brands from controversial sectors was made based on evidence that these sectors have a greater need for social legitimacy [54]. Therefore, it would be interesting to reveal some nuances in communication strategies and practices for brands in these sectors.

The *third criterion* was the country. The process of brand selection was also made in countries sensitive to sustainability issues, especially North America and Europe. Conventionally, sustainability is assumed to be a Western phenomenon, as historically, the origins of the concept of the social role of enterprises have arisen in the context of the democracies and market capitalism of North America and Western Europe [55].

The *fourth criterion* was the active presence of brands on social networks and the upkeep of information on corporate websites. It was important to obtain this information in order to evaluate recent communication practices implemented by various brands.

Finally, the *fifth criterion* evaluated was brand activism. The activism of conscientious brands is considered an important factor, demonstrating their real commitment to causes relevant to society and the environment.

Following these considerations, The Body Shop International, Danone North America and Seventh Generation were selected as best practices.

All three brands are recognized within the literature as brands with a strong focus on sustainability and CSR practices (*first criterion*). Danone, for example, is cited by Ind and Iglesias [3] as the first publicly traded French company to be legally recognized as an "Enterprise à Mission". This designation means that the company is obliged to strike a rational balance among its stakeholders and to have a purpose that promotes positive change in the social and environmental context in which it operates [3]. Danone North America and Seventh Generation are also brought up as sustainable brands in Brooke Moran's book [20] and Quinn's Short Survey [56]. Finally, The Body Shop has been cited by Olsen and Peretz [22] as an example of a conscientious brand and defined by Hartman and Beck-Dudleyas [19] as an ethics-oriented brand.

Next, the Body Shop International and Seventh Generation belong to a non-controversial sector (household and personal care products), while Danone belongs to the controversial food and beverage sector [54] (*second criterion*). Furthermore, all three brands belong to countries with a strongly sustainability-oriented culture [55] (*third criterion*). They also have a preponderant presence on social networks, and their corporate websites contain information updated to 2023 (*fourth criterion*). Finally, all three brands are active in the

social and environmental sphere, pursuing struggles in support of the environment and collective well-being (*fifth criterion*).

Table 1 summarises and compares the three case studies chosen based on the above criteria.

Table 1. A description of the case studies selected. Source: ns elaboration.

Conscientious Brand	**The Body Shop International**	**Seventh Generation**	**Danone North America**
Certified since...	2019	2007	2019
Overall B Impact Assessment score	82.6 BIA	114 BIA	96 BIA
Factor with the highest score	Community	Environment	Workers
Country	United Kingdom	United States	United States
Sector	Household and personal care products (non-controversial)	Household and Personal care products (non-controversial)	Food & Beverage (controversial)

Step 3. Collecting the data

After case selection, the collection of relevant data was carried out (step 3). The case studies conducted in this paper were based on secondary data (case study type II) [57], assuming that secondary data sources can provide insights as rich and valuable when compared to those achievable through interviews and direct observations [18,58]. This thesis is supported, for example, by the more recent work of Schiavone [59]. Accordingly, documents and online resources are helpful to the researcher in discovering meaning, developing understanding, and discovering insights relevant to the research topic.

Multiple sources of evidence were analysed, and case studies analysis was organised on the collection and analysis of the following types of data: (1) textual (e.g., official documents, textual content in the various sections of the corporate website and social network posts, articles by practitioners and other documents); (2) visual (e.g., images and videos). These multimedia data are publicly available online materials, and they were retrieved from the web and from brands' corporate and product brand websites and social network platforms (Facebook and Instagram).

Step 4. Analysing the data

These data were analysed through the research questions formulated in this paper. These exploratory questions aim at obtaining the first answers for delineation of the requirements of conscientious communication, taking into consideration the selected conscientious brand. Specifically:

(1)   *What* do conscientious brands communicate?

The paper seeks to outline what contents are preferred over others to communicate the conscientiousness of brands and what the focus of these contents is, considering case studies.

(2)   *To whom* do conscientious brands communicate?

It intends to clarify who is the main target audience for conscientious communication of the brands selected, specifically considering conscientious communication from a broader perspective.

(3)   *Why* do conscientious brands communicate?

The work aims to develop an understanding of the goals and desired effects of communication of the conscientious brands selected. In particular, it intends to outline the main functions of conscientious communication.

(4)   *How* do conscientious brands communicate?

It is interesting to outline the main principles of communication that brands follow in order to ensure effective communication of their consciousness.

(5)   *Where* do conscientious brands communicate?

Finally, the analysis seeks to identify the means and channels used by conscientious brands selected to communicate in the digital sphere.

The present research addresses the typical questions that arise from a 5W communication model, where "5W" refers to "Who", "What", "in Which channel', "to Whom' and "with What effect" [60]. This model's questions can be used to study communication in the new media area as well [61], and it is regarded as a useful tool in meeting the contemporary theoretical needs of scholars [62].

In this research, the "who" of the 5W model refers to conscientious brands. Therefore, the remaining questions are examined, including "why" (or "with what effect"), "to whom", "what", and "where" (or "in which channel"). In addition, there is a "how" question, which is fundamental to the extraction of the principles of communication of conscientious brands in the digital context.

The answers to these questions may serve as a starting point for obtaining theoretical insights, as well as for building a first managerial tool that could aid in orienting conscientious communication strategies and practices in the digital age.

3.2. Findings

3.2.1. The Body Shop International

The Body Shop International is a cosmetic brand offering high-quality, nature-inspired skin, body, hair and make-up care products. The history of the brand began in Brighton in 1976, thanks to its founder, Anita Roddick, who believed that business could positively impact society and the environment [63]. Today, together with Aesop and Natura, the brand is part of Natura & Co, a global, multi-channel, multi-brand beauty group committed to making a positive economic, social and environmental impact [64].

The Body Shop International obtained B Corp™ certification in 2019 and currently maintains an overall BIA score of 82.6 out of 200, which is the average score achieved by all subsidiary brands that have been certified (such as The Body Shop Greece, etc.). The company attained a high performance in the community factor, earning a score of 27.5 on the overall BIA score (82.6) [21]. Indeed, the brand notably distinguishes itself through its dedication and influence on the communities in which it conducts business. The Body Shop's affiliates commit to supporting local community initiatives while urging employees at each store to partake in a community volunteer project during their free time [63].

Anita Roddick, aimed to establish a line of natural cosmetics and attract customers' environmental consciousness instead of their vanity. This is expressed in The Body Shop's brand purpose: "We exist to fight for a fairer and more beautiful world", which reflects its innovative approach to cosmetics and beauty [64]. This purpose not only inspires the brand's production choices (e.g., the creation of skin- and environment-friendly products, optimal waste management, etc.) but also underpins its communication, from the corporate brand website to social media, serving as a guiding principle and inspiration for its stakeholders—the so-called Changemakers.

Brand communication on the corporate website focuses on content that emphasises the naturalness, high quality and low impact of its products. Product communication is mainly aimed at informing all potential stakeholders about the origin of raw materials and encouraging conscientious purchasing and environmentally friendly consumption. For example, in the "Charter for Change" section, a series of content is used to highlight the impact that buying sustainable products and making lifestyle changes can have on communities and the environment. Here, there are also some concrete examples of how consumers can help The Body Shop make an impact [64].

No sustainability report is available on the company's website, but there is content that aims to enhance the company's commitment to change and its values of inclusivity. Particularly, there is a section entirely dedicated to brand purpose, brand values, and brand activism.

The brand declares itself an "activist since day one" [64]. To stop the burning of rainforests, to raise awareness of the AIDS epidemic, and to combat human trafficking, it has fought alongside ardent activists. Within the activism section of the corporate website, the brand also takes a strong stance against animal testing in Europe. As part of its "Forever Against Animal Testing" manifesto, the brand encourages stakeholders to sign the "Save Cruelty Free Cosmetics" petition.

The petition was created in order to prevent the European Chemicals Agency (ECHA) from re-testing ingredients that have been used safely by consumers for many years on animals. Through the petition, the brand is mobilising communities to collect 1 million signatures from European citizens to take the issue to the European Commission [64].

On social media, the petition was mainly communicated on Instagram's channel through dedicated stories and posts. The stories depict Body Shop employees collecting signatures on the petitions. This demonstrates the brand's tangible commitment to the cause [65].

In general, The Body Shop's posts on Instagram and Facebook contain promotional and descriptive information about its products, mainly aimed at consumers, as well as information about the brand's team and the initiatives it supports.

3.2.2. Danone North America

Danone North America is part of Danone, a leading global food and beverage company specialising in fresh dairy products, beverages, biscuits and cereals. The company has a strong portfolio of brands, including Activia, DanActive, Danimals, Dannon, Happy Family Organics, Honest to Goodness, Horizon Organic, and others [66].

Established in the United States in April 2017, it is the seventh Danone subsidiary to become a certified B Corp. Approximately 75% of Danone's global sales are now covered by B Corp™ certification, representing significant progress towards Danone's goal of becoming one of the first certified multinationals [21].

Danone North America attained B corps™ certification in 2018, with an overall BIA score of 96 out of a total of 200. The brand excels in the "workers" factor with a performance score of 29 (out of 96), followed by "environment" with a score of 28 (out of 96 BIA) [21]. It is, therefore, distinguishable due to its positive influence on its employees' well-being and career progression, as well as its efforts to reduce food waste.

The brand purpose of Danone North America conforms to that of the parent company, Danone, and is expressed through the mission of "health through food to as many people as possible". Danone's mission is to offer consumers healthy products that promote environmentally friendly nutrition. The brand vision consistently reads "Danone, One Planet, One Health", placing the well-being of the community and the planet at the heart of the brand values. Values that the brand sums up with the acronym HOPE—"Humanism", "Openness", "Proximity", and "Enthusiasm". Danone claims to put people and relationships at the centre of every brand practice, to be receptive to ideas and input from around the world and to act with passion, energy, and boldness [66].

The brand communicates its commitment to the environment and society mainly through its official corporate website [67]. The Danone North America corporate website features a section called "Our Purpose". This section describes each project in detail with the intention of informing stakeholders about the brand's involvement in initiatives and projects. Danone's corporate website communication emphasizes the sharing of values within the community of "Danoners".

A good example is the "Danoner's Guide to Impact" [68]. The guide is an impact report in which Danone addresses "Danoners" (corporate citizens and members of the community) to inform them about the impact activities within the company, but most of all,

to invite them to be part of the change. Furthermore, the guide provides information on the brand's aspirations for the future and some of the initiatives promoted at the company level.

The "One person, One vote, One share" programme is worth mentioning. The programme allows all Danone employees to make their voices heard by participating in the Danone People Survey and owning a share in the company. The aim is to give employees a role in shaping the future of the company and the way it creates long-term value for all. At the same time, it promotes a shared and powerful vision for the company [68].

Danone rarely talks about products on its social media platforms. On its official Facebook profile, for example, there is a column called "Did you know?". This tells the story of the brand, its values and the initiatives in which it is involved [69].

It is Danone's intention to present itself primarily as a storyteller. As for the Instagram account, it feels like the profile has been fully managed and maintained by Danone employees, who tell their own stories and share environmental and social projects with the community [70]. This approach may help the brand's communication to be perceived as more authentic and spontaneous, focusing on telling people's life stories. There are also regular posts telling the stories of people who have benefited from the Danone Ecosystème Fund as proof of the brand's real impact on its ecosystem [71].

The posts link to a corporate website dedicated exclusively to projects developed by Danone Ecosystème. These projects respond to local challenges related to sustainable sourcing and regenerative agriculture, micro-distribution, the circular economy, and the promotion of healthy eating and consumption habits at key stages of life [71].

3.2.3. Seventh Generation

Seventh Generation is an American brand of products for home and personal care. It was founded in the late 1980s in Burlington, VT. Seventh Generation was inspired by the ancient Iroquois philosophy that stated, "in our every deliberation, we must consider the impact of our decisions on the next seven generations". Every product and every action of the organisation is guided by this mantra [72].

The brand joined the B Corp movement in 2007. According to the B Impact Assessment, Seventh Generation achieved an overall score of 114.5 out of 200. A total of 44.9 (out of 114.5 BIA) was attributed to environmental performance [21]. By selling products and services with a reduced environmental impact, Seventh Generation has been actively reducing the direct impact of its activities on the air, climate, water, land, and biodiversity for many years.

Brand purpose is demonstrated through the fight for environmental justice and the proposition, "The health of future generations depends on the action we take today". For over 30 years, the brand has aimed to improve global health, sustainability, and fairness for future generations and beyond. The commitment to future generations is exemplified in the constant research and use of innovative production techniques, which aim to lower CO_2 emissions, decrease waste, and create safer and more sustainable packaging. For example, the "Purpose Cleaner" line consists of cleaning products that adhere to the company's basic principles by using 100% recycled bottles. This leads to a decrease in the production of new plastic [72].

Brand communication focuses on product and ingredient disclosure on corporate websites. As stated in the "Ingredient Glossary" section, trade secrets are a thing of the past, and it is time to clean with purpose [72].

In the "Our Impact" section of the corporate website, in addition to communicating a range of brand commitments, there is the Annual Conscientious Report (or Climate Impact Report), an official document that assesses the brand's commitment to sustainability and reviews its progress towards its ambitious sustainability goals [73].

Brand communication should not only inform but also engage and inspire stakeholders. This is expressed in the statement, "We want to inspire a consumer revolution". As soon as the user enters the corporate website, a window pops up asking them to act and support the cause. In particular, the visitor is invited to "take action today" for the planet

by signing a petition calling on President Biden to declare a climate emergency and to abandon fossil fuels in favour of a renewable energy future. There is also a "Get Involved" section of the official corporate website where the petition can be filled in [72].

Facebook is not the brand's preferred channel for social media; however, it is active on Instagram, which is updated regularly. On its official Instagram page, the brand is consistent with the communication on the corporate website, alternating product communication with communication more focused on social and environmental initiatives.

Seventh Generation also uses its social media platforms to communicate its activism. Featured stories with the caption "Action" communicate all the initiatives that the brand has been at the forefront of with climate activists, such as "This is zero hours", "Rise for climate", and more [74].

Through Instagram, the brand also aims to influence consumers' lifestyles and consumption. The brand, for example, has announced its innovative partnership with the Green New Deal Network and will shortly be sharing videos on its official social media accounts about meaningful steps everyone can take to contribute to a more sustainable future [74].

4. Discussion

The work conducted in this paper aims to contribute to the literature on conscientious brands [2,4–10]. It seeks to broaden the existing debate on literature that is still in its infancy but is increasingly gaining attention in brand management.

The primary interest of this paper is to provide insight into conscientious brand communication in the digital environment, a topic that remains underexplored. Exploring the digital communication of conscientious brands selected for the case studies, the paper contributes to a preliminary definition of conscientious communication and seeks to define some of its key requirements in the digital environment. In particular, the conducted case studies help to discuss the core content, objectives, target audience, principles, means and channels of conscientious communication in the digital environment. Clarifying these aspects could be crucial for brands in terms of social legitimacy and building a conscientious brand reputation.

Thus, the paper provides further insights into the field of legitimacy theory. It supports the belief that communication is a tool for gaining social acceptance and recognition as a conscientious brand [9]. In addition, it emphasises the point that companies that adopt conscientious behaviour can use the corporate website and social media to gain and maintain stakeholder legitimacy over time [11].

4.1. Definition of Conscientious Brand Communication

The literature review revealed that there are no studies that provide a comprehensive view of the definition and requirements of conscientious brand communication. Thus, this paper proposes a definition of conscientious communication, recognising that it is vague in the literature and almost only discussed in connection with the B2B perspective [8,9]. In particular, the paper attempts to provide an initial answer to the following research question: what is meant by conscientious communication in a broader sense?

As discussed, the term "conscientious communication" is relatively new and refers to communication by conscientious brands. According to Beitelspacher and Getchell [17], conscientious communication is pro-social, appropriate to the task and context, and situated within the broader external communication factors (e.g., relationship, culture, practice) of the B2B organisational relationship. Kapitan et al. [16] use the label to define it as a key accelerator for building a shared purpose for social impact but do not provide a clear definition.

According to Ind and Iglesias [3], conscientious communication benefits society and improves the lives of individuals. These communication efforts contribute to "building a movement for change" [3] (p. 139) that engages and inspires stakeholders by demonstrating the brand's commitment to social and environmental issues in a truthful and accurate way.

However, no clear definition of conscientious branding is provided in the literature.

Based on the case study exploration and Ind and Iglesias' discussion [3], this research proposes a two-fold perspective to understanding conscientious communication: "communicating the conscience" and "communicating with a conscience".

"Communicating the conscience" may refer to the core and the main functions of brand conscientious communication. Meanwhile, "communicating with a conscience" refers to the fundamental principles that should guide the formulation and transmission of messages in a conscience-driven brand. In summary, communication could be defined as conscientious when it succeeds in conveying truthful, clear, accurate, relevant, and brand purpose-consistent value messages to all its stakeholders, appropriately leveraging the interactivity and power of the selected media to inform/report, engage, co-create, and inspire change in stakeholders' behaviours.

The proposed definition could be enriching considering the requirement of communication of a conscientious brand.

Furthermore, from the analysis of the case studies, it is indeed possible to define some initial answers to the questions: what the focus of conscientious communication is, to whom it is addressed, what its main functions are, how and with what means and channels it is developed. It is possible to make some proposals about the possible objectives, principles, core contents, target audience and means and channels of conscientious communication, as defined in this study.

4.2. Requirements of Communication for Conscientious Brands

Table 2 below compares the three brands studied as best practices, considering the requirements of conscientious communication in the digital environment.

Table 2. Case studies comparison. Source: ns elaboration.

Conscientious Brand	The Body Shop International	Seventh Generation	Danone North America
Brand Purpose (*What?*)	"We exist to fight for a more just and beautiful world".	"The health of future generations depends on the action we take today".	"Health through food to as many people as possible".
The main objective of communication (*Why?*)	• Co-creation and engagement of consumers and communities • Focus on environmental products (*differentiation*) • Influence consumers' lifestyles (*inspiring*)	• Co-creation and engagement of consumers • Focus on environmental products (*differentiation*) • Influence consumers' lifestyles (*inspiring*)	• Information and reporting • Engagement and co-creation with employees • Inspiring competitors in the sector (*inspiring*)
The main target of communication (*to Whom?*)	Stakeholders, in particular communities and consumers	Stakeholders, in particular consumers	Stakeholders, in particular supply-chain and employees
The main evident principle of communication (*How?*)	• Transparency • Openness • Consistency	• Transparency • Openness • Consistency • Accuracy • Clarity	• Transparency • Openness • Consistency • Accuracy • Clarity
The main means and channels of digital communication (*Where?*)	Corporate websites and social networks (Instagram and Facebook)	Corporate websites and social networks (Instagram)	Corporate websites and social networks (Facebook)

The description of the requirements of conscientious communication applied to the case studies will be addressed in the following paragraphs.

4.2.1. What? Communication of Brand Purpose

The focus of conscientious brands could be on communicating the brand's purpose and values and expressions of brand consciousness.

According to the literature, brand purpose defines why a conscientious brand exists and the transformative impact it intends to have on the world [13,52]. Specifically, purpose-driven branding [75] defines how the brand's activities will contribute to improving society and the planet and is placed at the heart of all the organisation's decisions [20,76].

Consider The Body Shop's brand purpose: "We exist to fight for a fairer and more beautiful world". It reflects the spirit and conscience of its founder, a campaigner against animal testing. The use of "we exist to" and "fight for" clearly expresses the brand's reason for being and its active commitment to creating a "beautiful word".

The brand purpose is also integrated and placed at the centre of internal communications to create a shared organisational culture. For example, Danone North America's brand purpose, "Health through food to as many people as possible", is articulated in a series of instructions to "Danoners" in the aforementioned "A Danoner's Guide to Impact 2022". This is because, ideally, a conscientious brand's communication should externally reflect the brand values and purpose that are shared by all organisations. Conscientious brands need to build on an ecosystem of stakeholders that are committed to the values of the organisation, act with integrity in accordance with those values, contribute to the financial success of the organisation, and have a positive impact on society.

It is also possible to use the brand purpose to guide communication on almost all corporate websites. For example, Seventh Generation's corporate website is rich in purpose-driven content, including highlighting projects and initiatives that focus on the company's real and lasting commitment to society and the environment.

Indeed, purpose-driven content dominates the communication of the conscientious brands studied in this paper.

4.2.2. To Whom? Conscientious Communication for the "Ecosystem"

In response to companies' central role in society, stakeholders (consumers, employees, business partners, NGOs, communities, etc.) demand the right to be informed, consulted and involved in corporate decision-making [4].

Conscientious brands consider engaging with a wide range of individuals and organisations on social, environmental and economic issues as an important aspect of their business management [2,5]. Conscientious brands ideally should consider the perspectives of all stakeholders and promote the creation of shared value through multi-stakeholder communication.

According to the literature, communication with business partners is fundamental to achieving a high degree of strategic alignment of the conscientious brand's identity and strategic goals [16]. At the same time, communication with employees is fundamental to creating a common understanding and a conscientious internal culture [13]. To facilitate this sense of belonging and recognition among all stakeholders, Danone uses the term "Danoners" on its platforms to refer to corporate actors, while The Body Shop uses the term "Changemakers". Both also provide change guides to align employees and business partners with the brand's purpose.

Concurrently, digital communication is fundamental to achieving social acceptance among consumers and reference communities. As seen, The Body Shop and Seventh Generation communicate primarily with their consumers, promoting wise consumption with the aim of getting them to embrace the brand's ideals and purpose through the purchase of its products. The idea is to build an extended brand ecosystem in which everyone creates value and contributes to collective well-being [38].

4.2.3. Why? Functions of Conscientious Communication

One of the main functions of conscientious communication is to inform key stakeholders about the concrete commitments and real projects supported by the brand to promote the desired change in society and the planet.

The *information and reporting* functions of conscientious communication imply demonstrating the substance behind brands' stated purpose and promises. In addition, it is crucial that, rather than hiding the negative impacts of their actions, brands disclose their genuine commitment to remediate [3] (i.e., through impact reporting, like Seventh Generation). Consequently, disclosing information could help to increase legitimacy and improve stakeholder perceptions [77]. Danone North America, for instance, shows more care and precision in the disclosure of information related to the sustainability of the company. This is in line with several studies that hypothesise that corporate sustainability disclosure is a means for controversial companies to proactively meet higher stakeholder expectations [78]. In this perspective, the more negative reputation associated with controversial companies prompts them to behave as good corporate citizens in order to mitigate stakeholder scepticism and improve communication credibility [79].

Further, the information function in conscientious communication can also be observed in Seventh Generation's and The Body Shop's disclosure of ingredients and in Danone North America's communication of their values. Besides reporting, Danone also uses communications to inform stakeholders about its brand values, especially on social media.

In addition to these functions, communication also becomes a key factor in facilitating *engagement and co-creation* in environmental and social initiatives, which are at the heart of conscientious brands [2,13]. According to the stakeholder theory perspective [80], the development of relationships and stakeholder engagement is associated with the commitment of companies to recognize the right of the public (consumers, investors, employees, etc.) to be heard and to report on social and environmental issues. Therefore, engaging with stakeholders seems to be inherent to conscientious branding. For example, Seventh Generation and The Body Shop seek to promote stakeholder engagement in brand initiatives through petitions.

Co-creation could also emerge in the joint attempt to formulate a brand purpose that is as relevant as possible to all stakeholders [81]. Stakeholders would become active participants in decision-making processes, and brands would be expected to "absorb" their social and environmental needs. This would mean not only creating and nurturing brand values from the bottom up and aiming for a broadly shared corporate culture [82] but also facilitating the adoption and integration of a transformative and co-created purpose by all stakeholders [2]. For example, Danone's "One Person, One Voice, One Share" program reaps the benefits of a co-creative approach to brand communication, reinforcing the legitimacy of the strategy and increasing employee engagement [17].

According to Ind and Iglesias [3], conscientious brand communication also has a *differentiating and positioning* function. Being an activist for conscientious brands, as in the case of The Body Shop International and Seventh Generation, means taking a clear position on socially relevant issues [83]. Conscientious communication allows the brand to differentiate itself from its competitors and position itself in the minds of consumers as a brand that has the interests of the community at heart.

In the case of The Body Shop International and Seventh Generation, differentiation also takes place within the product. By offering products that contain natural ingredients and/or aim to reduce their impact on the environment, the brand clearly differentiates itself from its competitors.

Another fundamental function of conscientious communication could be to *influence and inspire*, i.e., to contribute to the adoption of conscientious behaviours by all stakeholders [3]. This function encompasses the transformative purpose of a conscientious brand. Indeed, all three selected brands aim to have a significant impact on the lifestyles and consumption habits of their stakeholders. On the consumer side, not only by encouraging the purchase of products with a low environmental impact but also by encouraging recycling

or the adoption of good ethical and environmental behaviours through content series or the promotion of initiatives communicated via social platforms and blogs. In line with its dynamic and young target audience, Seventh Generation has chosen to harness the power of video content for this purpose.

Moreover, conscientious communication also aims to inspire and influence employees to achieve a strong sense of cultural identity [6] and to support partnerships in establishing conscientious behaviours [17].

Finally, it could also externalise to competitors, inspiring them to evaluate and change their "behaviours" to remain competitive in the market [3]. For example, Danone aims to inspire change in the food and beverage sector by communicating its efforts in sustainable sourcing and regenerative agriculture, micro-distribution, and the circular economy.

4.2.4. How? Principles of Conscientious Communication

The answer to the question of how to communicate the conscientiousness of the brand may lie in the principles of communication [84]. In the context of a conscientious brand, these principles are even more important. Whether consumers, managers or partners, there is a belief that a conscientious brand needs to be open, transparent, and honest about its intentions and that communication should reflect these principles.

For example, in the information and reporting function, *transparency and accuracy* in corporate communications messages are particularly important. When reporting sustainability performance, companies tend to emphasise the positive aspects and gloss over the negative ones. Since companies are attempting to maintain their reputations in the face of failures, the quality of their sustainability reports remains low, and the credibility of their communication is doubtful [36].

In the current context, a company that lacks transparency towards stakeholders creates tangible reputational risk [33]. Secrecy, in fact, undermines the functioning of the ecosystem of the brand and its relationships. When a brand conceals information about the product or service and how it is manufactured or delivered, customers cannot be sure that they are making the right choice. Likewise, an organisation's employees cannot be certain that what they are told is true, and they are unable to interact in a trustworthy manner with one another and with the organisation's partners.

The brands considered in this study are very explicit about their processes and impacts, which creates a sense of closeness between them and their stakeholders. For instance, Seventh Generation can be considered a best practice in transparency. Through its annual conscientious report, it simply states its limitations and ongoing efforts in the achievement of its environmental purpose.

Related to the transparency principle, *clarity* is another principle that could be considered for conscientious communication. Clarity makes communication more effective. It makes information easier to understand and, therefore, more transparent [42] without compromising the accuracy of information. The eye-catching graphics used by Danone, for example, provide the right combination of transparency, clarity, and accuracy of information.

Consistency between communication and management practices is another key principle [3,42]. Consistency could be ensured when the transformative purpose is strongly shared by all stakeholders and when key brand messages express a long-term commitment to the social and environmental causes supported [3]. Strong correspondence and continuity between "what brands said" and "what brands did" is evident in all three selected brands.

Moreover, consistency could facilitate the perception of the *authenticity* of the messages communicated by the conscientious brand [84]. Achieving authenticity implies the verifiability of the information conveyed as well as the presence of concrete examples and testimonies. For example, content generated by actions such as activism sends a signal to stakeholders that brand claims are legitimate [85]. The communication of Danone, in particular, has a strong sense of authenticity due to its use of testimonies from people involved in their projects.

Finally, open dialogue and genuine listening are essential to build trust with stakeholders and work together on solutions to social and environmental crises [86]. Co-creation of purpose, for instance, requires *openness* in conscientious communication, where all parties to a conversation or debate can express themselves to each other. It also requires a deep understanding of stakeholder beliefs and behaviours so that the company knows how to present environmental and social attributes and how to capture the needs of different stakeholders [2].

4.2.5. Where? Role of Corporate Websites and Social Network Platforms

The brands included in the case studies consider different means and channels as communication touchpoints [84]. Brand–stakeholder touchpoints allow for the exchange of tangible and intangible resources among stakeholders within the brand ecosystem and are essential to establishing lasting and genuine relationships.

Corporate websites and social media platforms are valuable tools for disseminating sustainability information, promoting social and environmental concerns, and triggering participatory mechanisms [42–44]. Even for conscientious communication, the use of these digital tools is useful to inform, engage and inspire stakeholders in a transparent, consistent, accurate, clear and open way.

According to case studies, the corporate website can be one of the most valuable sources of information about a brand's environmental and social commitments [43]. The corporate website can be seen as an excellent tool for communicating brand values and purpose, with dedicated sections (e.g., Danone's "Our Purpose").

In addition to sections dedicated to official documents describing the environmental and social impact of the brand, sections on the corporate website dedicated to projects supported by the brand would allow stakeholders to obtain more accurate information and increase their engagement. For example, the presence of a "Get Involved" and "Our Impact" section on the official corporate website, as well as on Seventh Generation, could be a good way to inform and engage stakeholders in the causes supported by the brand.

The use of social media can also be a successful communication strategy to inform, engage, and inspire stakeholders [45]. Social media makes it easier to implement the principles of conscientious communication by facilitating interaction and enabling a more direct dialogue between companies and stakeholders [42]. The Body Shop International demonstrates how active engagement can be fostered from the bottom up by harnessing the interactive potential of the social media environment, for example, through Instagram stories and ongoing calls to action promoted through this tool.

In addition, using available social platforms as direct channels with a more immediate communication impact could prove successful in communicating the brand's purpose and values to stakeholders and getting them to embrace them [16]. The perception of brand authenticity among partners, consumers and potentially other employees could be enhanced by telling stories about life within the company or how communities have benefited from the initiatives and projects promoted by the company [3]. In the case of Danoners, for example, the narrative on the brand's official Instagram and Facebook pages appears to be entirely created by the brand's employees.

Another step to consider would be to facilitate and encourage the creation of an online community around the brand's environmental and social projects. Communities could become unofficial places from which to campaign for brand-supported causes [38]. By engaging in activism, The Body Shop works with communities of activists who care about the brand, promoting an authentic brand image.

5. Practical Implications: A "Compass" to Orient Conscientious Communication

Several practical implications can be drawn from the present study regarding conscientious brand communication. It is possible to identify implications for organisations with conscientious brands, more specifically for brand communication managers and practitioners, and to a lesser extent for stakeholders.

The requirements traced in this research can be a starting point for defining conscientious communication strategies and practices that organisations with a conscientious brand could adopt. Effective conscientious communication strategies and practices, indeed, may be crucial for organisations seeking social legitimacy and enhancing reputation through leveraging conscientiousness.

Therefore, the research provides managers and practitioners with a compass tool to orient conscientious communication strategies and practices (Figure 2). It may be helpful to establish and/or improve the conscientious communication of brands and enhance their brand's reputation and legitimacy. Further, the compass may also assist brand communication managers and practitioners in avoiding greenwashing and woke-washing practices [3,12]. Indeed, it aims to define genuine communication that aligns practices and communication with the real commitment accomplished by brands.
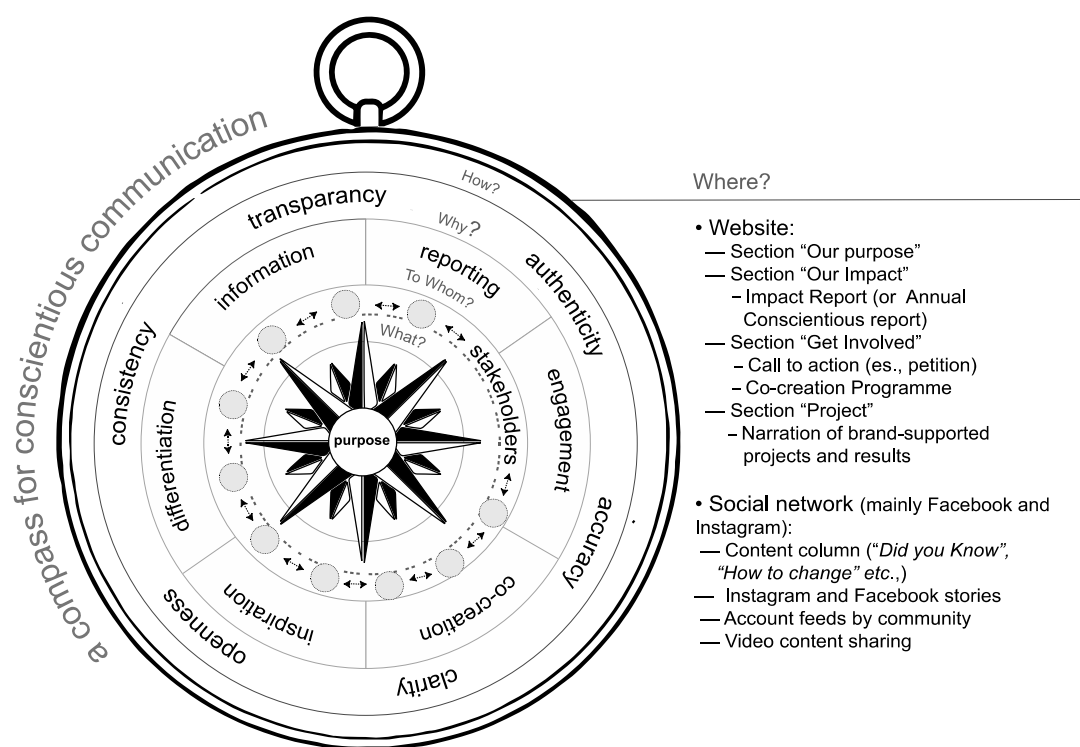
Figure 2. A "compass" for the orientation of conscientious communication strategies and practices. Source: ns elaboration.

Figure 2 provides a way to visualize the requirements for conscientious communication identified in this research. Answers to the "what", "to whom", "why", "how", and "where" questions may guide brand communication managers and practitioners in selecting the most appropriate communication strategies and practices.

Brand purpose and brand purpose-driven content could be placed at the core of conscientious communication strategies and practices (*what?*). This content could guide the internal and external communications of a conscientious brand and be targeted at all stakeholders in the brand's vital ecosystem (*to whom?*).

According to Abratt et al. [6], a brand communication manager or practitioner could ensure that the brand's values and purpose are understood and shared by all the people who represent the brand, including employees and partners. At the same time, brand communicators could also prioritise communication with external stakeholders such as investors, consumers, and target communities. Mainly to gain social legitimacy and a solid reputation as a conscientious brand [9].

It is recommended that brand communication practitioners and managers seriously consider using social media platforms as well as the corporate website (*where?*). Reputation

formation and social legitimacy depend on signals sent out by an organisation through various touchpoints [87]. In line with the best practices highlighted in the case studies, such touchpoints as communication and reputational tools [84] enable brands to inform, report, engage, co-create and inspire their stakeholders to adopt ethical behaviour (*why?*).

According to the case studies in the present work, corporate websites could be designed to devote more space to communicating their purpose and the social causes they support and to encourage more active stakeholder engagement with dedicated sections or clear calls to action to help the planet and society. Reporting documents are certainly essential, but they also need to be clearer by non-experts [3]. Social media can facilitate this understanding by stakeholders (e.g., consumers) and communicate brand commitments in a more transparent, open and authentic way. However, the use of more eye-catching and immediately usable graphics could not come at the expense of communication accuracy and consistency (*how?*).

Finally, the proposed work may also have implications for stakeholders. The compass shown in Figure 2 may also be used as an authentication tool for stakeholders to understand the extent to which brands are effectively meeting these requirements in their digital communications. Indeed, the accomplishment of these requirements may be evaluated by stakeholders as a sign of their conscientiousness.

6. Limitations and Future Research

In this study, some limitations have been identified. The first limitation concerns the preliminary definition of conscientious communication provided. This initial definition of conscientious communication, applicable to a multistakeholder perspective, was derived from the case study analysis and the literature on conscientious brands. Specifically, it considers the concept of conscientiousness and how it was applied in the digital communication of the case studies examined. This is not a consensus definition, so future research could use this preliminary definition and subject it to expert judgment to determine consensus through a rigorous Delphi study [88].

Due to the conceptual nature of this research, secondary data were consulted in order to analyse the case studies [57,59]. The secondary data are informative for the purpose of the research, but the analysis of them may suffer from the typical limitations of a deductive approach. In other words, the theoretical research questions that drove the research directed and focused attention on specific issues related to the communication of brand consciousness. This may have led to the failure to consider other important issues which can be addressed in future studies. For example, what other requirements besides "objectives", "target audience", "principles", "means and channels", and "core content" can be considered for the definition of conscientious communication in digital environments?

It also discusses one of the typical limitations of case study methodology, which is the limited ability to generalise, namely, to produce results that may be transferred to other contexts [18,47]. It should be noted that the results that emerged from the analysis of the main objectives, audiences, principles, means, channels, and contents through the case studies selected in this work may only be some of those that can be implemented by conscientious brands. The research conducted is, therefore, not intended to be normative but rather descriptive.

Furthermore, the transversality of the results should be verified through future empirical evidence and through the analysis of more brands belonging to different sectors (controversial and non-controversial) and countries. To this end, the use of case-based theory-building approaches [48,49] to increase knowledge about conscientious communication and to develop new theoretical and managerial models for the strategic management of conscientious communication is encouraged. Moreover, it is suggested to consider the conscientious communication of B Corps. Throughout the manuscript, it has been made clear that B Corps are organisations that reflect high standards of social and environmental performance, accountability and transparency. It is believed that case-based theory

building with such brands in mind is a way of exploring an authentic and genuine way of communicating.

Despite these limitations, the proposed work is an attempt to stimulate academic interest in conscientious communication by providing insights that can be used as a starting point for further research. To broaden the discussion on this topic, it would be interesting to explore several other aspects of conscientious brand communication in digital environments in the future.

Many conscientious brands use ESG goals to guide their sustainability efforts [23]. By exploring how these brands align their communication with specific ESG objectives, future research can offer insights into how they tangibly implement these practices. ESG criteria are pivotal for various stakeholders, such as investors, consumers, and regulators. Investigating how conscientious brands communicate their commitment to ESG goals can help shed light on how they address the expectations of these critical stakeholders. In addition, ESG goals often include well-defined metrics for measuring environmental and social impact. By studying how conscientious brands communicate their performance against these metrics, future research can contribute to discussions about impact measurement and transparency. Finally, understanding how conscientious brands incorporate ESG goals into their strategic decision-making processes and how they communicate these decisions can provide valuable insights into their overall business strategies.

As a final consideration, it may be interesting to jointly investigate how conscientious brands communicate their sustainability goals in digital environments and how stakeholders perceive the communication of these goals by conscientious brands [23,34]. In this way, the company's actual communication actions and stakeholders' perceptions could be captured in simultaneous empirical studies.

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