

Marino, Luisa

A brand "born from water" : storytelling strategies and sustainability narratives in the construction of Biotherm's brand identity

Brno studies in English. 2025, vol. 51, iss. 1, pp. 35-51

ISSN 0524-6881 (print); ISSN 1805-0867 (online)

Stable URL (DOI): <https://doi.org/10.5817/BSE2025-1-3>

Stable URL (handle): <https://hdl.handle.net/11222.digilib/digilib.83003>

License: [CC BY-NC-ND 4.0 International](https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-nd/4.0/)

Access Date: 11. 12. 2025

Version: 20251210

Terms of use: Digital Library of the Faculty of Arts, Masaryk University provides access to digitized documents strictly for personal use, unless otherwise specified.

A BRAND “BORN FROM WATER”: STORYTELLING STRATEGIES AND SUSTAINABILITY NARRATIVES IN THE CONSTRUCTION OF BIOTHERM’S BRAND IDENTITY

Brno Studies in English
Volume 51, No. 1, 2025

ISSN 0524-6881 | e-ISSN 1805-0867
<https://doi.org/10.5817/BSE2025-1-3>

LUISA MARINO

Abstract

With the rise of the so-called ‘blue beauty’, many beauty brands have had to adapt to the need to promote narrations and self-narrations that align with the urgency to care for the environment and minimize their impact on ocean health. Among the brands that prominently position themselves as environmentally friendly and ocean-conscious stands *Biotherm*.

Drawing on a theoretical framework of Corporate Storytelling and employing a social semiotic approach to Multimodality, this article aims at analyzing how *Biotherm* communicates its corporate social responsibility (CSR), leveraging sustainability issues in its Blue Report, a free-to-consult, multimodal document, accessible on the company’s website. In particular, the article addresses the interplay between verbal and non-verbal modes in constructing and disseminating *Biotherm*’s brand narrations throughout the Blue Report.

By means of multimodal analyses of selected double-spreads from the Blue Report and drawing on Alexandra Georgakopoulou’s work on ‘small stories’ (2007, 2020, 2023), the article shows how ‘grand’, formal narratives about the company’s CSR merge with ‘small’, semi-formal narratives in the verbal mode. Furthermore, the analysis highlights the extent to which non-verbal modes crucially facilitate the connection between ‘grand’ and ‘small’ narratives, enabling the brand to build (and disseminate) its reputation and foster stakeholder engagement around eco-themes like sustainability and the preservation of ocean health.

Key words

Corporate storytelling; corporate social responsibility; story; environmental performance report; ocean advocacy

1. Introduction

The extremely varied panorama of the global beauty industry has seen, in the last few years, a compelling growth of green beauty brands that advocate and promote environmental sustainability. While beauty brands are finding new ways to entice a share of customers which is, day by day, increasingly aware of the impact

of their skincare and beauty routines on the environment, green beauty is already shifting towards blue beauty.

Among the brands that have built their own identity around the commitment to preserve the oceans stands *Biotherm*. The company was founded in Monaco by the biochemist Jeanine Marissal, in 1952. Marissal found out an impressive affinity between human skin and thermal plankton, figuring out thermal plankton could be used in skincare products since they combined striking healing properties with high dermal tolerability. The name *Biotherm*, in fact, blends the two pillars of the brand: ‘bio’ for biobased ingredients and ‘therm’ for their thermal origins.

This article aims at investigating the verbal and non-verbal storytelling strategies used by *Biotherm* to communicate corporate social responsibility (CSR). More specifically, it focuses on the Blue Report, a free-to-consult, multimodal document accessible on the company’s website, which addresses the company’s environmental performance. Within the theoretical framework of Corporate Storytelling (Norlyk et al. 2014; D’Avanzo 2021; Brown 2006; Boje 2008; Riel 1995; Schulz and Kitchen 2004) and using Multimodality and Social Semiotics (Jewitt, 2009; Kress and Van Leeuwen 2006; Kress 2009; Stöckl 2009) as methodological tools, the article delves deeper into the interconnections between verbal and non-verbal texts in order to look at the role played by their interplay in the communication and in the dissemination of the company’s environmental performance.

Drawing on Alexandra Georgakopoulou, (2007, 2020, 2023), Birgitte Norlyk, Marianne Wolff Lundholt and Per Krogh Hansen (2009) and Paul Capriotti (2011), the article addresses storytelling as an integral part of corporate communication. In this perspective, it is not viewed in a traditional, narratological perspective, but “as a set of tools to reach a more value-based approach to the sensemaking of organizations and their stakeholders” (Norlyk et al. 2014: 105).

By means of multimodal analyses of selected double-spreads from *Biotherm*’s Blue Report, the article highlights how ‘grand’, formal, narratives about the company’s corporate social responsibility (CSR) merge with ‘small’, semi-formal narratives on the verbal side. As section 3 shows in detail, non-verbal modes facilitate the connection between grand/formal and small/semi-formal narratives, to such a degree that the company leverages multimodal narratives to build and disseminate reputation and to foster engagement.

2. Theoretical premises and methodological approach

Since ‘corporate environmental reports are multisemiotic documents’ (Skulstad 2008: 182) in which both verbal and non-verbal elements have a narrative value, the analysis of the ‘Blue Report’ required an integrated methodological approach which turned to both Corporate Storytelling and a social semiotic approach to Multimodality. Thus, this section is divided in two subsections. The first includes a literature review on storytelling intended as a communicative strategy in corporate discourse (in particular in the construction of corporate brands) while the second focuses on multimodality as a tool to delve deeper into the multi-semiotic character of the text under scrutiny.

2.1 *Storytelling and/in corporate communication*

In the post-digital era, companies have radically changed their ways of communicating themselves to the rest of the world (Mautner 2008; Capriotti 2011; Baldi and Borello 2016; Barni 2005). On the one hand, the hyper-connection granted by the Internet has facilitated and encouraged a one-to-one relationship between companies (the addressers of corporate communication) and stakeholders (the addressees). Indeed, a device connected to the Internet is sufficient to access all the information any stakeholder would seek for, anytime and anywhere. On the other hand, the availability of different multimedia technologies and the existence of social media and social sharing tools has given companies the possibility to use several expressive codes, producing contents that can be easily (and almost infinitely) remediating and disseminated. Yet, massively reaching a vast group of stakeholders has come with a cost, because while in traditional corporate communication the asymmetrical flow of information (company to stakeholders) granted a certain information control, the immediate availability of any kind of data and information, together with their replicability, has created a disequilibrium to the extent that “stakeholders are no longer receiving information about CSR activities just from the company, but from a range of sources, not all of which the company can control” (Capriotti 2011: 360–361). Therefore, while it is true that companies have increased the possibility of enticing different kinds of prospective consumers, striking them with several expressive codes, it is also true that they have to fight with stronger selection processes that come from the individuals’ necessity to overcome the excess of information. In this scenario, storytelling seems to be a possibility, for a company, to stand out narrating one’s own peculiarities (Fontana 2009; 2010; D’Avanzo 2021; Boje 2008).

Norlyk et al. (2014) define corporate storytelling as the:

strategic utilization of stories and storytelling (in the broad sense of man’s ability to tell and understand narratives) to create coherence and progression concerning the companies’ or organizations’ brand, identity and development (105).

The term storytelling began to be rather used beyond the field of traditional narratology by the end of the 20th century, when people came to be defined ‘storytelling animals’ (MacIntyre 1981) and stories became an instrument to meaning-making for a broad range of disciplines, identity building processes and cultural products. Within this frame, Cees van Riel (1995) laid the foundations for the development of corporate storytelling, highlighting the role played by stories in corporate communication. Indeed, he addressed stories not just as anecdotes or standalone accounts, but as structured, strategic narrative processes aimed at building a corporate identity, managing reputation, and fostering stakeholder support through emotional connection, transparency and credibility.

Drawing on these premises, Norlyk et al. (2014) provide an overview of corporate storytelling. They too do not address the term ‘story’ in traditional narratological terms, but rather as a tool (or a set of tools) presenting companies/

organizations as unified ‘bodies’. These entities, they claim, use stories to manage internal and external communication and maximize communicative effects, thereby controlling, influencing, and engaging with stakeholders.

In the essay *All Marketers Are Liars*, Seth Godin wrote: “successful marketers are just the providers of stories that consumers choose to believe” (2005: 15). He wanted to draw attention to the need humans have of feeding themselves with stories (be they true or not) because that is where they experience satisfaction¹. Even if discussing how human brains process and store experiences goes beyond the scope of this article, it could be useful to borrow from Jerome Bruner’s “the Narrative Construction of Reality” (1991) to understand why storytelling has come to be increasingly used, over the years, in marketing and corporate communication. The psychologist argues that:

we organize our experience and our memory of human happenings mainly in the form of narrative – stories, excuses, myths, reasons for doing and not doing, and so on. Narrative is a conventional form, transmitted culturally and constrained by each individual’s level of mastery and by his conglomerate of prosthetic devices, colleagues, and mentors. (4)

This means that storytelling results in effective communication strategy because it resembles the way(s) in which humans interpret and catalogue their experiences on a daily basis, thus being able to master the social reality that surrounds them.

If we aim at looking at a company’s environmental reports using a narrative approach, we should first acknowledge that narratives do not exist in a vacuum. Besides, if we admit that organizations have a discursive nature, Boje’s definition of companies as ‘storytelling organizations’ (see Boje 2008) helps focus on the dynamic character of storytelling and on the limitless possibilities of repurposing a brand’s identity.

This fosters two considerations:

- (i) the ways in which a company narrates itself depends on the time, the socio-political and the cultural context in which the narrative is conceived and disseminated;
- (ii) when a company is narrated through storytelling, the disseminated narrative (or story) is made up of “all the identity-relevant narratives that their participants’ author about them” (Brown 2006: 736); meaning its consistency is the result of a discursive practice.

In this perspective, corporate brand narrations communicate a company’s identity adjusting to the socio-political trends and the cultural norms of a given time. Since they present a company’s identity as uniform and consistent (even though a company is normally a complex, plurivocal organization) corporate brand narrations “are a form of discursive practice” (Brown 2006: 740) that seek monovocality (see Boje 2008) for the sake of facilitating and encouraging neural coupling and emotional connection with the stakeholders.

2.2 Multimodality and Multimodal Discourse Analysis: tools and methods for linguistic research

In the introduction to *The Routledge Handbook of Multimodal Analysis*, Carey Jewitt maintains that “multimodal research looks beyond language to explore a wide range of modes and communicational contexts” (2009: 2). Thus, while carrying on multimodal research, scholars explore all the semiotic resources and the modes that can be used in communication for making meaning: from written to spoken language, from writing to images, from sound to gaze and so forth.

In the last decades multimodality has become a very much used approach in the study of language because of what Hartmut Stöckl has defined a ‘multi-semiotic turn’ (2009: 203) in Communication Studies. According to the scholar, multimodality can be considered as the “natural” mode of communication because:

- (i) humans have more than one sense, and normally use more than one sense to communicate;
- (ii) involving more than one sense in the communication helps realizing a more efficient communicative act;
- (iii) the communicative repertoire of a culture is characterised by “transcriptions”; meaning humans tend to “translate” messages from one medium to another in order to make sense of what surrounds them (i.e commenting films, describing pictures, performing and annotating etc.).

In this perspective, multimodality is

- (i) the “co-presence of various semiotic modes in a given overall text” (Stöckl 2009: 206);
- (ii) a technique which facilitates and/or enables the communication;
- (iii) “a patterned semiotic activity” (Stöckl 2009: 206), meaning what is at stake is both the modes used within a culture and their users, who infer, receive and/or interpret meanings.

The idea of multimodality as a patterned semiotic activity is directly linked to the assumption that the semiotic interplay between modes does not happen in a vacuum but is linked to a social context that is timely, spatially and culturally circumscribed. In this regard, the act of meaning making becomes a social practice (Fairclough 1995; Fairclough and Wodak 1997) that can be studied in a social semiotic perspective. Thus, *Multimodality and Social Semiotics* (Halliday 1978; Jewitt 2009; Martinec and Salway 2005; Kress and Van Leeuwen 2006; Kress 2010) provide the tools to supplement a purely linguistic research, which would not properly address contemporary communication, due to its complexity.

Fairclough (1995) conceptualises discourse as something profoundly connected to social structures, (collective) identities, and power. He emphasises that discourse is not ‘just’ about language but also about what social actors do with language. In this sense discourse is a *way of acting* because social actors perform

actions through language. Furthermore, discourse is used to represent the world, but it also affects and frames the ways in which social actors perceive the world; thus, discourse is a *way of representing*. Finally, discourse is a *way of being* as it shapes social actors' individual and collective identities and contributes to determine social roles.

These theoretical premises prove to be helpful, when it comes to analyse the discursive strategies used to build corporate brand identity, since they help scholars detect the linguistic choices used by a company to act on the market, narrate itself and try and establish connections with prospective consumers. In this perspective, a combined approach with Multimodal Studies enables researchers to delve deeper into modes' interdependence as well as the effects of such interdependence on communication.

With *Reading Images. The Grammar of Visual Design*, Kress and van Leeuwen presented a groundbreaking framework to investigate non-verbal texts in Communication Studies. In so doing, they opened up new perspectives on the study of language and aimed at describing "the way in which depicted elements – people, places and things – combine in visual 'statements' of greater or lesser complexity and extension" (2006: 1). Reinterpreting Michael Halliday's three metafunctions of language, the two scholars outlined what happens on the ideational, interpersonal and textual levels in multimodal texts. Concisely:

- any semiotic mode has to be able to represent reality, both in terms of objects and aspects and in terms of their relationships (ideational metafunction);
- any semiotic mode has to be able to represent social interaction, i.e. the social relationships between the producer and the receiver of a sign (interpersonal metafunction);
- any semiotic mode has to be able to create texts, that is complex units of meaning in which the elements are regulated by principles of internal and external cohesion and coherence (textual metafunction).

The focus of the following analysis has been narrowed to modality (interpersonal metafunction) and composition (textual metafunction). Both, in fact, seem to be fundamental aspects in corporate brand narrations and environmental reports. Modality refers to the attitude of the brand narrator towards what has been communicated about and around the brand (both on a verbal and a non-verbal level) and the possible emotional responses this attitude can generate. Composition enables critics to infer which sets of information are conveyed through the report and how they could impact on brand equity and, eventually, on sales.

3. Under the Lens: *Biotherm's* Sustainability Philosophy

The term 'blue beauty' was coined in 2018 by Jeannie Jarnot (CEO of Beauty Heroes). She aimed at celebrating beauty brands that were not 'just' environmentally and socially sustainable but committed to the protection (and restoration) of oceans and marine ecosystems. Thus, while 'green beauty' can be considered

as an umbrella term referring to beauty products that are generally considered eco-friendly (for example because they are vegan, cruelty-free, or because they use exclusively natural ingredients and appear in fully recycled/recyclable packages, or even because they support environmental charities), blue beauty can be considered as a hyponym. It is about removing from beauty products chemicals and microplastics that could harm the oceans and use production technologies that limit water waste and preserve marine ecosystems.

The concept of 'blue beauty' is central to *Biotherm's* CSR communication, to the extent that the company dedicates a whole document to the communication of its environmental performance.

Biotherm's Blue Report is a free-to-consult document published on the company's website, in the 'Commitments' section. It is as a special kind of 'Environmental Performance Report' (EPR) (Skulstad 2008: 187) which indicates a company's commitment to preserve the oceans and seas, setting objectives to be less impactful on global waters (and, to a broader extent, on the environment) and developing (internal) policies aimed at boosting sustainability. Even though, according to Skulstad's definition an Environmental Performance Report is normally issued annually (see Skulstad 2008), the latest Blue Report uploaded on *Biotherm's* website dates back to 2022.

Drawing on this premise, this section sheds light on the relationships between the verbal and non-verbal elements in *Biotherm's* Blue Report with the aim of assessing the role played by both the visual and the verbal modes in the shaping of the rhetorical strategies used by the company to signal its levels of commitment towards the environment.

In the last decades scholars have traced down some markers and cues that help detect modality in a multimodal text, as well as scan a text in terms of composition, so to determine to what extent the interrelationships among modes contribute to produce meaning. Yet, it is worth remarking that both on a grammatical and on a visual level, modality is strictly connected to the values and beliefs of a certain social group and to the ways in which such a social group connects and relates to other social groups. The textual metafunction (and consequently composition) is also affected by the critics' background and the contexts from which they analyse a multimodal text. This premise is fundamental to acknowledge that the following analysis of *Biotherm's* Blue Report is just one of the multiple analyses that other critics could provide, while assessing the same text.

When it comes to using categories to interpret and analyse communication contents, it must not be neglected that even the interpreter is embedded in a given socio-cultural context, which shapes and frames his/her way to approach communication. Regarding environmental reports and their analysis, one could argue that the (perceived) degree of reliability of the message(s) conveyed, as well as the (perceived) degree of social distance or social closeness, depend on both the social group and the social connections that have contributed to create the documents, and on the interpreter's social group and social connections.

Aud Solbjørg Skulstad argues that in Environmental Performance Reports, companies tend to use a double rhetoric strategy to signal their commitment towards the environment. More in detail, they:

- (a) directly show the company’s commitment towards environmental issues by “announcing environmental policy and objectives [and] making ‘promises’” (2008: 188);
- (b) signal the business ethics by “reporting on the company’s environmental performance [and] giving ‘evidence’” (2008: 188).

Building upon this as a base, the analysis of modality and composition (Kress 2009, Kress and van Leeuwen 2006) could help scholars who deal with corporate storytelling to speculate on the effect of verbal and non-verbal narrations of/on sustainability in customers’ engagement and willingness to buy the brand.

The analysis that follows highlights how a brand can leverage multimodal tools to create and convey strategic narratives, aimed to persuade and unify stakeholders around a common interest. Due to space constrains, only three sections of the *Blue Report* were considered in this analysis, that is those related to the three pillars of the company’s ‘Water Lover Program’²: formulas, design solutions, ocean preservation. The analysis treats each double-spread (i.e.: each pair of facing pages) as a single textual unit. This means that the verbal and non-verbal elements make sense through their interrelation within the textual unit.

The image below (Fig.1) features the first of the three double-spreads analysed in this section (Blue Report 2022: 22, 23).



Figure 1. Double-spread introducing *Biotherm’s* ocean-friendly bio-based formulas (Blue Report 2022: 22, 23)

This double-spread is dedicated to the presentation of *Biotherm’s* bio-based formulas, to the positive consequences that using bioscience has had on both the branded products and the environment, and to the presentation of the company’s future goals. Considering Stöckl’s types of content-related linkage

(2009: 216), the image on the right elaborates the verbal text featured on the left. This means that readers are able to infer that the image shows lotion born out of bioscience formulas just because that is specified in the verbal description on the left. This is not a detail to neglect because it suggests that, in the construction of this specific double-spread, the verbal text comes before the non-verbal text.

Even though both pages are connected on the side of contents, Figure 1 shows how, in this double-spread, verbal and non-verbal texts are separated by both visible and invisible framing lines. This enables readers to consider verbal and non-verbal texts also as separate content blocks that can be ‘read’ on their own. Moreover, on the left, verbal texts are divided in two sections, thanks to additional framing strategies. The ‘goal section’ is, in fact, made salient as it is enclosed in two horizontal lines, as well as the percentage and the title, made salient because of font size and type. In terms of composition, in the double-spread verbal and non-verbal contents are organised and related on a horizontal axis, so that the information flow moves from left to right. Yet, salience plays here a strategic role. Isolating and juxtaposing the most salient elements in the double-spread, the result is:

More Bioscience Formulas → 100% → Image

The arrows indicate the order in which verbal and non-verbal elements are read: from top to bottom and from left to right. Thus, the sequence provides an immediate set of information to any category of readers, be it that of potential customers, who are just skimming the report, or that of motivated customers, who are willing to know more. In a corporate storytelling perspective, the elements that are strategically made salient are the bases on which the narration of the brand is grounded: bio-based technology (‘more bioscience formulas’ in the double-spread), oceans preservation (‘100% [of our formulas more respectful of aquatic life]’ in the double-spread) and the image of the lotion as a promotional preview of the set of products offered by the brand.

The ‘visual framing’ mentioned before is also functional in terms of storytelling as it ideally divides the ‘grand’ story from the ‘small’ one. Indeed, drawing on Georgakopoulou’s concept of small stories (2007, 2020, 2023), one could argue that the verbal text on the right presents the company’s official goals, while the verbal text on the left presents the small stories, intended as the company’s collective effort to achieve those goals. This seems to be corroborated by the fact that the verbal text on the right makes a large use of the pronoun ‘we’ and indulges in positive verbs and verb phrases (e.g: embraces co-creation with nature; is able to recreate (nature); enhance without compromising (on effectiveness or safety), etc.). These elements are more than stylistic choices, as they suggest both a rather uniform vision of the company and the reduction of the boundaries between the company and the stakeholders. Indeed, if the company is presented as ‘we’, meaning it has one voice, the result will be a more transparent communication of CSR. Seemingly, describing *how* the company does what it does, rather than just listing what it does (or has done) contributes to make the processes and the results more tangible, creating a sense of shared values.

On the other hand, the verbal text framed in the goal section is a more formal description of what the company has done and will do, in order to advocate for ocean health. In this case, setting a precise timing and using tenses which focus on the result of a past action (i.e: has been performed to improve) or tenses which communicate certain commitment (i.e: will be) contribute to foster authenticity and credibility in the communication of CSR.

Focusing on the double-spread as a whole, the most salient elements are the image of the lotion on the right and the percentage on the left, mainly because of their dimension. They are strategically made salient, since they are fundamental elements in the brand's narration, grounded in environmental sustainability and skincare effectiveness. For this reason, they have to be the first elements to catch the attention of prospective customers. As regards the information value, assuming that "the left is the side of the 'already given'" (Kress and van Leeuwen 2006: 180), the newness is given by the image of the lotion featured on the right of the double-spread. Here, thanks to colour modulation (different shades of blue) and brightness, readers are able to discern the texture of the lotion. The dark blue background against which the light blue brush strokes stand out, and the ways in which light and brightness are rendered to highlight colour gradation, contribute to possibly reproduce, to the eyes of the reader/viewer, the thickness and the viscosity of the lotion. In this sense, by offering a more lifelike representation, tridimensionality can enhance a perception of realness and contribute to catch the attention of the reader/viewer.

My use of the adverb "possibly", above, is necessary as Kress and van Leeuwen explain that realness or abstraction are not inherent properties of the world, but rather conventions that can be understood (or interpreted) through coding orientation (2006: 165). In other words, the degree of reality or abstraction perceived by readers/viewers, when they try to make sense of the visual languages they face with, is affected by the social and cultural conventions they are embedded in.

In terms of brand narrations, promoting a unique image of a product (brand awareness) and encouraging brand associations in the customer's mind, are effective techniques to foster an emotional evaluation on the side of the customer (or prospective one). In Marketing Studies, brand awareness and brand associations have proven to be fundamental in increasing brand equity³, that is the commercial value of a brand, at a certain point in time, but also its social value, coming from the subjective emotional evaluation of every single customer who chooses to purchase that brand instead of its competitors.

The analysis of the first double-spread reveals that even though non-verbal elements are the most striking and impactful elements, because of their salience, it is the verbal description that contributes to create a unique image of the product, presenting the brand as factual and trustworthy.

Figure 2 (below) features the second double-spread object of this analysis. Here the concept of sustainability is paired with that of circularity, as one of the goals of the brand is proposing new design solutions coming from recycled sources.



Figure 2. Double-spread introducing *Biotherm's* sustainable packaging and approach to value chain (Blue Report 2022: 34, 35)

Since the graphic layout remains the same throughout the report, even the second double-spread shows verbal and non-verbal texts separated by both visible and invisible framing lines. Once again, the 'goal section' is made salient thanks to both the two horizontal lines that frame the text and to the years in bold, aiming at presenting the brand's agenda at a glance. The image on the right is also made salient thanks to size, colour and sharpness. As for the first double-spread (Fig. 1 above), in terms of "content-related linkage" (Stöckl 2009: 216) even in the second one the image on the right elaborates the verbal text featured on the left. In this perspective, the newness of the image displayed on the right stands in the fact that "it is presented as something which is not yet known [...] by the viewer, hence as something to which the viewer must pay special attention" (Kress and Van Leeuwen 2006: 181). In fact, the set of containers represented on the right can be 'recognized' as recycled just because the verbal texts on the left present *Biotherm's* commitment to shift to circular economy.

Focusing on the verbal mode, copywriters employed emotional and rational persuasion strategies (cfr. Bhatia 2019; Iversen 2014) by combining high and low modality in the verbal description on the left. As a matter of fact, in the first three sentences, the subjects ('(our) Water Lovers roadmap' in the first sentence and 'We' in the second and third sentences) are meant to emotionally involve customers (or prospective ones), proposing the image of a community. In so doing, copywriters encourage the creation of an emotional bond between the brand and the customer while creating alignment between what a prospective customer may desire and what the brand is able to offer. For this reason, the verbs 'includes', 'have pledged to reduce' and 'aim to design' contribute to convey an idea of

transparency. They are high-modality verbs that present facts ('We have pledged to reduce our virgin plastic consumption...') and truths, both established ('our Water Lovers roadmap includes using more sustainable materials...') and in the making ('We aim to design our packaging for plastic circularity...'), aiming at engaging readers and invite them to join in. In the last sentence of the verbal description, instead, 'Biotherm' is the subject. Here, after having emotionally engaged readers, copywriters re-focus the narration on the brand and explain in detail the steps that will enable it to shift towards circularity. Low modality is given to this last sentence, both because the use of 'Biotherm' as a subject implies social distancing with the reader, and because the verb 'hopes' does not represent reality but something that may (or may not) happen.

Looking at the verbal texts on the left through the lens of storytelling, one could say that the formal, action-oriented language used in the 'goal section' to communicate the brand's agenda corresponds to the 'grand' story. On the other hand, the emotional connotation of the 'we' statements that describe *Biotherm's* approach to circular economy correspond to the 'small' story (Georgakopoulou 2007), that is the narration(s) through which the brand communicates its values while trying to build a relationship with its stakeholders, based on commonality of interests and commitment.

By the analysis of the previous double-spreads (Fig. 1 and Fig. 2), it seemed that the verbal mode comes first throughout the report, in the sense that non-verbal texts are used to elaborate information which are essentially conveyed through verbal texts. Also, in terms of corporate storytelling, non-verbal texts are used as a complement to verbal ones, through which the brand's identity and commitment are mainly expressed. Yet, the last double-spread under



Figure 3. Double-spread featuring Biotherm's involvement with NGOs working for Ocean preservation (Blue Report 2022: 44, 45)

scrutiny (Fig. 3, below) shows that this consideration does not hold true for the entire document.

Figure 3 features a section in the Blue Report (2022: 44, 45) where *Biotherm's* activism is presented together with its partnerships with NGOs involved in Ocean preservation.

Here, a variation in both modality and linkage changes the reading(s) of the whole text. As to content-related linkage, the image on the right extends the verbal text on the left (cfr. Stöckl 2009: 216). Indeed, the visual mode introduces an element that is related to what is expressed through the verbal mode, but not co-present in the verbal mode: the two women with the Water Lover sweat-shirt. As a matter of fact, it seems to add that *Biotherm's* Water Lover program can involve common people, not necessarily primary stakeholders (i.e. managers, board members, investors, employees).

In this perspective, as regards information value, the left side of the double-spread “seems to be the side of the key information, of what the reader must pay particular attention to” (Kress and Van Leeuwen 1996: 180). Above everything else, the brand seems to convey that anyone can be an agent of change. This consideration is also supported by the fact that an almost naturalistic modality is given to the image on the right. The two women are, in fact, in focus, while the background is slightly overexposed, so much so that the excessive brightness blurs some of the details. As a consequence, the two women’s sharpness contrasted to the blurry background makes the image just “one step away from ‘full contextualization’”, in Kress and Van Leeuwen’s words (1996: 161). This means that it reaches the highest degree possible in terms of naturalistic modality since both a fully articulated and a weakly connoted background would be artificial and unrealistic.

Concerning the graphic layout on the left, there are no substantial differences with the double-spreads analysed before (Fig. 1 and Fig. 2 above). Even in this case the verbal texts are organised in two separate sections. Yet here both the sections have a title. If the section on the right is dedicated, as usual, to the brand’s goal(s), the section on the left, titled ‘Our vision’, is devoted to the presentation of *Biotherm* as a company concerned with protecting the oceans and preserving the environment. Here, copywriters use once again high modality to engage the stakeholders and foster the narration of a brand which is willing to gather a community around a shared objective, as suggested by the large use of the first-person plural pronoun ‘we’ and the possessive adjective ‘our’ (cfr. Georgakopoulou 2007).

In this last double-spread both the visual and the verbal modes cooperate to emotionally engage consumers, or prospective ones, so to make them feel part of a community that can take a stance and act for the environment. Yet, it is the visual mode to dominate here. Indeed, while in the first (Fig. 1) and second case (Fig. 2) abstract and conceptual photography were used, the last double-spread (Fig. 3) features photographic naturalism. As a consequence, while in the first two cases verbal texts were necessary to make readers/viewers infer that the brand uses bio-based formulas and promotes circularity, in the last case a truthful representation of reality (rendered with natural light and the absence of staged sets,

for example) goes beyond simply capturing the readers/viewers' attention. It is meant to enable readers/viewers to connect with what is represented and, consequently, with the brand.

4. Closing remarks

The article has shown how *Biotherm* uses the Blue Report to communicate the company's corporate social responsibility (CSR) using storytelling as a main communicative strategy. The multimodal nature of the Blue Report has required an analysis of the communication strategies which took into account the interplay between verbal and non-verbal modes. Thus, Multimodality and Social Semiotics were used as methodological tools to address a document which does not just present the brand's identity, intended as its values, ethics, approach(es) to eco-themes, but also as the means through which stakeholders are encouraged to feel (or to become) part of a community aimed at pursuing shared interests like ocean preservation and, generally speaking, environmental advocacy.

Looking at the narrative strategies found throughout the Blue Report through the lens of Alexandra Georgakopoulou's works on small stories (2007, 2020, 2023) the article has presented storytelling as the means through which 'grand,' formal (multimodal) narratives, dealing with the communication of the company's environmental agenda, interrelate with 'small' (multimodal) narratives, aimed at depicting the company as committed and close to the stakeholders, leveraging emotional language and a rather informal tone. In this perspective, while either elaborating or extending the verbal mode, the non-verbal mode contributes to provide a link between 'small' and 'grand' narrations, creating narrative consistency.

The multimodal analysis of the Blue Report has shown how, in the narration of *Biotherm's* environmental commitment and business ethics, verbal and non-verbal contents cooperate to engage and communicate with stakeholders and, in particular, with prospective consumers. Far from being 'just' narrations that make the brand stand out in the beauty industry, the verbal and non-verbal texts in the report are aimed at satisfying precise marketing needs: creating emotional bonds and non-tangible values which could resonate with the stakeholders.

Even though analysing three double-spreads out of a whole report cannot provide an exhaustive picture of the storytelling strategies used to build and promote a brand's identity, it has nonetheless shown how looking at corporate storytelling through a multimodal discourse analysis framework can offer insights on the ways in which verbal and non-verbal language can be used by companies to both achieve rhetorical goals like encouraging trust, fostering brand loyalty and enhancing brand reputation and to persuade and establish a connection with stakeholders.

The Blue Report has thus become for *Biotherm* the chance to promote a brand identity grounded in safety (natural ingredients and bio-based formulas); transparency (anything about the brand seems supported by evidence); trust (goals and agendas are shown) and beliefs (compliance with a shared opinion that

people should act to preserve the environment). In other words, through the Blue Report, the brand has been able to leverage narrations of sustainability in order to stand out in the market as a transparent, trustworthy and unique company.

Such an analysis cannot help predicting if the linguistic strategies used throughout the report have contributed (or will contribute) to increase brand equity⁴. Yet, it has tried to contribute to literature on corporate storytelling, a rather “amorphous field” (Norlyk et al. 2014: 105) to this day, shedding light on the role played by multimodal communicative strategies in a company’s attempt to leverage environmental discourses to establish long, solid relationships with its stakeholders and to build and spread corporate brand narrations which could possibly fight market saturation.

Notes

- ¹ He speaks of “psychology of satisfaction” (Godin 2005: 15).
- ² This is the name given to *Biotherm’s* environmental action program.
- ³ In *Brand Management: an introduction through storytelling* (2021), Emmanuel Mogaji presents brand equity as a “set of assets” (165) schematised in: brand awareness, brand loyalty, brand association, enterprise assets, perceived quality. Each one of these assets is responsible for value creation both as a single parameter and as part of a whole. For these reasons brand managers need to be attentive to the role each parameter plays in branding processes, so to make the most out of their interactions in terms of value building.
- ⁴ The commercial value of a brand, at a certain point in time, but also its social value, coming from the subjective emotional evaluation of every single customer who chooses to purchase that brand instead of its competitors.

References

- Baldi, Benedetta, and Enrico Borello (2016) *Comunicazione, cultura e mass media*. Alessandria: Edizioni dell’Orso.
- Barni, Silvio (2004) *La comunicazione d’impresa. Come prepararsi ad attuare una comunicazione di successo*. Milano: Franco Angeli.
- Bhatia Tej K. (2019) Emotions and language in advertising. *World Englishes* 38, 435–449. <https://doi.org/10.1111/weng.12420>
- Biotherm. (2022) *The Blue Report. The Water Lovers Sustainability Progress Report*. Biotherm. https://int.biotherm.com/on/demandware.static/-/Sites-NGBiotherm-ILM-Library/default/v90999d7ffe6b5bd0eff1d10b681c0428648d0dae/Blue-report-V2%20/dist/pdf/BIOTHERM_RAPPORT_ENVIRONNEMENTAL_2022_FINAL_VERSION.pdf
- Boje, David M. (2001) *Narrative Methods for Organizational and Communication Research*. London: Sage.
- Boje, David M. (2008) *Storytelling Organisations*. London: Sage.
- Brown, Andrew D. (2006) A narrative approach to Collective Identities. *Journal of Management Studies* 43(4), 733–753.
- Bruner, Jerome (2011) The Narrative Construction of Reality. *Critical Inquiry* 18, 1–21.
- Caldas-Coulthard, Carmen Rosa and Theo Van Leeuwen (2003) “Introduction”. *Social Semiotics* 13(1), 3–4. <https://doi.org/10.1080/1035033032000133481>.

- Capriotti, Paul (2011) Communicating Corporate Social Responsibility through the Internet and Social Media. In: Ihlen, Øyvind, Jennifer L. Bartlett and Steve May (eds.) *The Handbook of Communication and Corporate Social Responsibility*. Hoboken: John Wiley & Sons, 358–378.
- D’Avanzo, Stefania (2022) The Role of Cognitive Linguistics in Corporate Storytelling – A Methodological Perspective. *mediAzioni* 34, A77–A88. <https://doi.org/10.6092/issn.1974-4382/15513>, ISSN 1974-4382.
- D’Avanzo, Stefania and Antonella Garofano (2021) Telling food and wine stories: storytelling strategies from linguistic and marketing perspectives. In: Pennarola, Cristina, Vanda Polese and Sole Alba Zollo (eds.) *Specialized Discourses of Well-Being and Human Development*. Torino and Paris: L’Harmattan, 207–225.
- Fabris, Giampaolo (2009) *Societing. Il marketing nella società postmoderna*. Milano: Egea.
- Fairclough, Norman (1989) *Language and Power*. Harlow: Longman.
- Fairclough, Norman (1995) *Critical Discourse Analysis*. Boston: Addison Wesley.
- Fairclough, Norman (2003) *Analysing Discourse: Textual Analysis for Social Research*. London: Routledge.
- Fairclough, Norman and Ruth Wodak (1997) Critical Discourse Analysis. In: van Dijk, Teun (ed.) *Discourse as Social Interaction*. London: Sage, 258–284.
- Fill, Alwin F. and Penz, Hermine (2018) *The Routledge Handbook of Ecolinguistics*. New York/Abingdon: Routledge.
- Fisher, Walter R. (1984) Narration as Human Communication Paradigm: The Case of Public Moral Argument. *Communication Monographs* 51, 1–22.
- Fontana, Andrea (2009) *Manuale di storytelling. Raccontare con efficacia prodotti, marchi e identità d’impresa*. Segrate: Rizzoli.
- Georgakopoulou, Alexandra (2007) *Small Stories, Interaction and Identities*. Amsterdam: John Benjamins.
- Georgakopoulou, Alexandra, Stefan Iversen, and Carsten Stage (2020) *Quantified Storytelling: A Narrative Analysis of Metrics on Social Media*. Cham: Palgrave Macmillan.
- Georgakopoulou, Alexandra, Korina Giaxoglou, and Sylvie Patron (Eds.) (2023) *Small Stories Research: Tales, Tellings, and Tellers Across Contexts*. New York: Routledge.
- Giordano, Walter and Emanuela Ammendola (2023) Scripting the Communication Strategy for Mineral Water Advertising in the USA. A Multimodal Textual Analysis. *Iperstoria* 21 Spring/Summer, 380–411. <https://doi.org/10.13136/2281-4582/2023.i21.1315>.
- Godin, Seth (2005) *All Marketers Are Liars. The Power of Telling Authentic Stories in a Low-Trust World*. New York: Portfolio.
- Halliday, Michael A. K. (1978) *Language as Social Semiotic: The Social Interpretation of Language and Meaning*. London: Arnold.
- Halliday, Michael A. K. (1994) *An Introduction to Functional Grammar*. London: Arnold.
- Iversen, Stefan (2014) Narratives in Rhetorical Discourse. In: Hühn, Peter, Jan Christoph Meister, John Pier and Wolf Schmid (eds.) *Handbook of Narratology*. Berlin and Boston: De Gruyter, 575–586.
- Jewitt, Carey (2009) *The Routledge Handbook of Multimodal Analysis*. Abingdon and New York: Routledge.
- Kress, Gunther, and Theo van Leeuwen (2006) *Reading Images: The Grammar of Visual Design*. [1996]. Abingdon and New York: Routledge.
- Kress, Gunther (2009) *Multimodality: A Social Semiotic Approach to Contemporary Communication*. London and New York: Routledge.
- Machin, David and Andrea Mayr (2012) *How to do Critical Discourse Analysis. A multimodal Introduction*. London, Thousand Oaks, New Delhi and Singapore: Sage.
- MacIntyre, Alasdair C. (1981) *After Virtue: A Study in Moral Theory*. Notre Dame: U of Notre Dame P.

- Martinec, Radan and Andrew Salway (2005) A system for image–text relations in new (and old) media. *Visual Communication*, 4(3), 337–371. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1470357205055928>.
- Mautner, Gerlinde (2008) Analyzing Newspapers, Magazines and Other Print Media. In: Wodak, Ruth and Michal Krzyzanowski (eds.) *Qualitative Discourse Analysis in the Social Sciences*. London: Bloomsbury, 30–53.
- Mogaji Emmanuel (2021) *Brand Management. An Introduction through Storytelling*. London: Palgrave MacMillan.
- Norlyk, Birgitte, Marianne W. Lundholt and Per K. Hansen (2014) Corporate Storytelling. In: Hühn Peter, Jan Christoph Meister, John Pier and Wolf Schmid (eds.) *Handbook of Narratology*. Berlin and Boston: De Gruyter, 105–114.
- Riel, Cees van (1995) *Principles of Corporate Communication*. London: Prentice Hall.
- Schulz, Don E. and Philip J. Kitchen (2004) Managing the Changes in Corporate Branding and Communication: Closing and Reopening the Corporate Umbrella. *Corporate Communication Review* 6(4), 347–366.
- Skulstad, Aud S. (2008) Creating a “green” image in the public sphere: Corporate environmental reports in a genre perspective. In: Knapp Karlfried and Gerd Antos (eds.) *Handbooks of Applied Linguistics: Communication Competence, Language and Communication Problems, Practical Solutions*. Berlin and New York: De Gruyter Mouton, 181–201.
- Stibbe, Arran (2015) *Ecolinguistics. Language, Ecology and the Stories We Live By*. Abingdon and New York: Routledge.
- Stöckl, Hartmut (2009) The Language-Image-Text – Theoretical and Analytical Inroads into Semiotic Complexity. *AAA – Arbeit aus Anglistik und Amerikanistik* 34(2), 203–226. <https://www.jstor.org/stable/26430902>.
- Stöckl, Hartmut (2019) Linguistic Multimodality – Multimodal Linguistics: A State-of-the-Art Sketch. In: Wildfeuer, Janina, Jana Pflaeging, John Bateman, Ognyan Seizov and Chiao-I Tseng Wildfeuer (eds.) *Multimodality. Disciplinary Thoughts and the Challenge of Diversity*. Berlin and Boston: De Gruyter Mouton, 41–68.

LUISA MARINO is Research Fellow (RtdA) in English Language, Translation and Linguistics at the University of Naples “Federico II”. She holds a Ph.D. in Literary, Linguistic and Comparative Studies from the University of Naples “L’Orientale”. Her main research interests include Corporate Storytelling, Social Semiotics, Critical Discourse Analysis, Translation Studies, Stylistics, Gender and Feminist Studies and Post-Colonial Studies. She is currently working on corporate storytelling, the language of food, marketing discourse and sustainability. [ORCID: <https://orcid.org/0000-0003-0588-4063>]

Address: Luisa Marino, Department of Economics and Statistics, University of Naples “Federico II”, 80126 Naples, Italy. [email: luisa.marino@unina.it]



This work can be used in accordance with the Creative Commons BY-NC-ND 4.0 International license terms and conditions (<https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-nd/4.0/legalcode>). This does not apply to works or elements (such as image or photographs) that are used in the work under a contractual license or exception or limitation to relevant rights.

