



# STORIES OF SUSTAINABILITY

*Adapting to audiences, mere marketing or a strategy for legitimation?*

## The role of web-shops for second-hand stores

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### Background

We live in a time where conventional businesses enable our "throwaway society" and foster environmental degradation. Hybrid organizations that aim to alleviate a social and/or environmental issue are business forms that can prove more apt at creating value beyond profit. The most well-known hybrid organization is the social enterprise, a rising business form since the crisis of 2007 that helps the Netherlands reach its climate goals. One of these goals is to be completely circular by 2050. The second-hand store is a great example of a circular business that can help reach this target.

### Introduction

Traditionally viewed as the "poor man's shop", second-hand stores are getting more popular and now attract a broad range of customers. They thus seem to gain legitimacy. Legitimacy is normally viewed as something a new venture needs to attain by living up to the expectations of its customers. However, (1.) a venture might have multiple audiences with differing expectations, especially in the case of hybrid organizations, that combine a business and charity identity. (2.) a venture constantly needs to maintain legitimacy. (3.) environmental issues are conventionally regarded as threats to legitimacy, but might actually be opportunities for certain businesses. One second-hand store that has chosen to actively target sustainable shopper is the Estafette Recycle boulevard in Leeuwarden, thus the direct reason for "legitimizing opportunities" in this research.

### Objective

One way ventures can reach out to customers is through storytelling. Storytelling is not only an important marketing strategy, but also a legitimation strategy. This research has focussed on a specific site of storytelling for second-hand stores, namely the webshop. The establishment of an online presence is for many second-hand stores very recent and demonstrates a willingness to answer the (evolving) expectations of customers. The research question therefore was:

*How does storytelling on the webshop of a sustainable second-hand store function as a legitimation strategy?*

Researching storytelling practices on a webshop is not only novel and therefore important to better understand for second-hand stores that aim to launch their own webshop, but also has never been researched in light of how it might function to gain legitimacy in particular customer segments. Such insight might help the normalization of second-hand shopping and hybrid organizations, an essential step in the transformation of our society to a more sustainable future.

### Methods

I have interviewed 6 high-positioned actors of second-hand stores that have sustainable value creation at their core and have a webshop. The interviews were semi-structured with open ended questions, fitting for an explorative research. The interview was firstly concerned with mapping the story that is told by the SSHS's and the sources they draw on for their storytelling. Secondly, it was concerned with how this story was told, in other words through which media, and thirdly the role of the web-shop specifically in this storytelling process. Lastly, to map the degree of storytelling as a legitimation strategy, there were interview questions aimed at understanding to what extent a particular consumer segment was actively targeted and why. These themes were thus used to map the story that was told and how. To this extent the existing literature was used to develop themes, however the interview data was mostly coded inductively.

### Results

The main story of the second-hand stores, the mission, is generally not told through the web-shop, but another story takes the stage, namely that of the 'treasures'. Most second-hand stores selectively put products on the web-shop that attract a more high-income customer. This can be viewed as a legitimation strategy in two ways. Firstly, it aims to attract a consumer segment that is new or still small for second-hand stores. Secondly, it demonstrates a conformation to what second-hand stores think the average consumer wants and expects to find at a second-hand store, namely that what is 'trendy'. Although many second-hand stores purposely aim to touch upon a customer segment that is unconventional to the standard second-hand store, it must be noted that there exist various other reasons to selectively put 'treasures' on the webshop. These reasons are intertwined and mutually influence each other. For example, various second-hand stores put special products online to get a better value for it, thus unconsciously targeting a more high-income customer. Although the high-income customer is not always actively targeted as consumer, the young consumer segment is for most second hand stores a target they are increasingly focused on.

### Implications

**Theoretical:** This research has shown that second-hand stores use the webshop to tell a story fitting their business identity more than their charity identity. Moreover, it has become clear that storytelling is used as a legitimation strategy to attract a particular consumer segment, thus adding to the recent research on legitimation to differing audiences.

**Practical:** The research has shown that second-hand stores have a hard time harmonizing their business and charity identities. The webshop is not used as a site for storytelling the mission of the store. Thus, the sustainable story might be an legitimating opportunity through which the store can successfully harmonize its identities and legitimize themselves to a broader audience.